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June 2<sup>nd</sup>,

It seemed to me well,

to add the following  
to pass away.

Death + 80



# FORTUNE'S WHEEL

“ Turn, Fortune, turn thy wheel with smile or frown,  
With that wild wheel we go not up or down ;  
For man is man, and master of his fate.”

—*Eneid.*

# FORTUNE'S WHEEL

A NOVEL

BY

ALEX. INNES SHAND

AUTHOR OF

'AGAINST TIME,' 'LETTERS FROM WEST IRELAND,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. II.

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# FORTUNE'S WHEEL.

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## CHAPTER XVI.

### POLITICS AND POETRY.

Possibly Jack Venables might be deeply in love : he missed no opportunity of making himself agreeable to his cousin ; but he did not give much time to sentimental meditations. Never did any man lead a fuller life, and his physical energies were inexhaustible. He might dine late ; he might go to dances and receptions ; but all the same he would be up betimes, fresh as if he had gone to bed at eleven, with a basin of gruel by way of nightcap. Day after day Mr Winstanley became more convinced that he could never

have hit on an apter pupil, or a more intelligent and agreeable young companion. Jack understood him *à demi-mot*, and spared him all the trouble of tedious explanations. Making some slight allowance for necessary inexperience, he could trust him almost as he could trust himself. Flying threatenings from his enemy the gout might be a nuisance, but they were no longer aggravated by business anxieties. He cast his cares on the shoulders of his versatile young friend. Then Jack was always ready to amuse him. He brought the budget of the afternoon's news to the dining-room in Berkeley Square ; he was better than the best of the evening papers, for his *chronicles du jour* were invariably entertaining. He kept Mrs Winstanley in good humour too, and acted as a patent lightning-conductor to avert domestic storms. Altogether, Winstanley blessed the mischance which had so providentially placed them on so intimate a footing.

Of course Winstanley was habitually selfish : but happily selfishness may have its softer side, and is not always logically consistent, otherwise the world, where it is a case of

every one for himself, would be an infinitely more disagreeable place than it is. It might be supposed that Winstanley, having found such a treasure, would have done his best to monopolise it. He might easily have paid his debt of gratitude indirectly out of his pocket, and left his *protégé* no reason to complain. But whether it were that he had become disinterestedly attached to the young man, or whether, as Jack had suggested to Leslie, he took a personal pride in his success, certain it is that he did not confine himself to either financial or social patronage ; and one morning Jack was surprised and touched by a proposal very unexpectedly made him.

It was his habit to look in at Berkeley Square after breakfast. Usually he was shown into Winstanley's library on the ground-floor ; sometimes, though not very often, he was asked to walk up-stairs to the ladies. On this particular morning Winstanley was awaiting him with evident impatience. Jack, who had learned to read him pretty thoroughly, saw that he had a piece of news to communicate, and that the news was good and great. So he put on an impassive expression of counte-

nance, and waited to be astonished. All the same, he discounted it in his own mind. "It's something about that concession of the Transcaucasian Telegraphs ; and perhaps I could tell him as much as he knows."

" You have sometimes thought of trying your hand at politics—eh, Mr Jack ? "

" Politics, sir ! Politics ! Well, yes, I have—vaguely. I suppose most men in my position, with fair possibilities before them, must sometimes think of going into Parliament, sooner or later. My hands, as you know, are full enough for the present, and there is plenty of time before me. But may I ask whether your question has any immediate meaning ? "

" Assuredly you may ask, and I am ready to answer. I know your hands are pretty full ; but it appears to me that you always manage to get through your business. Naturally you don't think of Parliament for years to come. You are far too practical and sensible. Parliament is no profession, except for a man of easy means. But there are other political openings besides the House of Commons ; and politics may be made to pay by a

clever and aspiring young man, irrespectively altogether of any paltry salary."

"No doubt, sir. But as I cannot guess what you are hinting at, I can express no opinion on a particular case. I need hardly say that if you have anything to suggest, it is sure to command my best consideration. Hitherto, I have always followed your advice implicitly."

"So you have, and you have been none the worse for it, I hope ; and you are perfectly right not to commit yourself rashly, or to take a jump in the dark. You have heard there are to be important changes in the Cabinet ?"

"Certainly, sir—that is matter of notoriety, though there are only rumours as to the shuffling of the cards."

"He can't be commissioned to make me an offer of the Chancellorship of the Exchequer," thought Jack, "or even the Chancellorship of the Duchy of Lancaster,—though that last is precisely the berth that would suit me down to the ground."

"Yes, there are to be important changes ; and it has pleased the Premier, not a bit too soon, to consider the paramount claims of my

brother. The Lord Privy Seal goes to Ireland, and Wrekin is to take his place."

Jack was, of course, full of congratulations, which Winstanley received with affected indifference.

"Wrekin should have had office when the Cabinet was formed, as he had undoubted capacity for a place of more active responsibility. However, perhaps the Minister could hardly have done more for him in the circumstances; and that he should have done so much is some apology for the past. But that is neither here nor there. The offer was made and accepted more than a week ago. Now Wrekin, as it chanced, anticipated me, in coming to consult about a private secretary. There were two connections of his who might plausibly push their pretensions: he did not greatly care about either; and in making choice of the one, he would give deadly offence to the other. One is Winnington, his wife's nephew; the other is Tressylan, his son-in-law's brother. 'It's a deuced embarrassing dilemma,' said he, 'for choose which I will, the pair of them will be always at each other's throats; there will be family cabals and all

manner of unpleasantness ; and if I accept place on those terms, adieu to domestic peace.'"

" 'It *is* an awkward dilemma,' said I, 'and the best way out of it is to choose neither. Then by-and-by, when both have resigned themselves to the inevitable, you may hope to enter on a quiet life. Tell Winnington and Tressylan that I had your promise ; and as it happens, I have the very man for you.'

" 'And who may he be ?' Wrekin asked, very naturally. So then I spoke out seriously, and told him that you were the man for the place. At first he protested, and objected to your youth and inexperience. These, I insisted, were strong recommendations, considering your very remarkable adaptability. You may be sure I said more than enough in your favour, which I won't make you blush by repeating. But I reminded him, that though our acquaintance has been short, I had proved you already in all manner of ways. I said that as you knew nothing of the work, he could train and form you as he pleased ; that I could answer for your tact, discretion, intelligence, industry,—all the rest of it. Wrekin

already liked what he had seen of you ; and, in short, I gave you so good a character, that you will have to excel yourself in order to justify it, if you take the post. Which of course you will ? Its pay is not to be despised, though that is a secondary consideration. It sets your foot several rungs higher on the ladder, and there is no saying how quickly you may climb. If you make yourself useful, Wrekin will look after that. Probably he will be shifted to a less ornamental office : at any rate, he commands powerful interest—and I shall be always at his elbow to waken him up.”

Jack grasped the advantages of the situation at once, and was really overpowered with gratitude. He grasped Winstanley’s hand too, and thanked him with genuine earnestness.

“ Personally, of course, it is all I can desire, and infinitely more than I could have hoped. There is only one thing makes me hesitate.”

“ And that is ? ”

“ Well, it sounds bumptious, I know ; but I flattered myself that I may sometimes have been serviceable to you. As private secretary, my time would be chiefly Lord Wrekin’s or

the country's ; in any case, I should be tied to town here."

" Serviceable ! Yes, of course you have been serviceable, or I should never have spoken to my brother. I weighed matters well before making the suggestion, and decided that any considerations personal to myself must not be permitted to stand in your way. Moreover, there is no reason why we should not continue to work together ; for the duties of a secretary demand distraction, and I believe your capacity for work to be unlimited. Should there be anything special to be done abroad now and then, I may make interest with Wrekin for a few days' holiday ; and with regard to those various financial schemes of ours, there will be no harm in your forming political connections. And as these ripen, and when you have had a certain political training, we shall see about the seat in Parliament, where you may blossom into statesmanship if you can. If you don't sit in a Cabinet before you die, you shall only have yourself to blame."

" Nothing would surprise me now, sir ; and if her Majesty sent for me to-morrow, it would not be much more of a sensation than this."

" Well, that you may be ready for any eventuality, we had better settle this bit of business out of hand. If you ring the bell at your elbow there, I shall send for the brougham, and carry you off for official presentation to my lord."

It said a good deal for Mr Venables's popularity, that the news of the piece of good fortune that had befallen him was received with considerable astonishment, but general approbation. In fact, his pleasant manners, and modest though manly bearing, had made him a universal favourite, and went far towards disarming envy. Messrs Winnington and Tressylan were naturally bitter: they pitied Lord Wrekin, who must be falling into his dotage; as public men and patriots, they deplored a wanton abuse of patronage. But nobody else appeared to think that the appointment was likely to shake the foundations of the State. The social journals mentioned the matter rather kindly; though one of them, greatly to Jack's annoyance, remarked that it never rained but it poured, and hinted at the probability of the marriage of the fortunate youth with a lovely and richly-dowered heiress,

one of the darlings of Belgravian society. It was a double-barrelled suggestion, which might apply equally well either to Julia Winstanley or Grace Moray, and consequently might be doubly embarrassing. On the other hand, the *double entendre* was so far advantageous, that neither of the young ladies need take it home to herself. Nor did the self-consciousness of either give him any reason to suspect that the indiscreet *canard* had been brought under her notice. Miss Winstanley congratulated him in all good-fellowship—in the course of conversation almost giving him to suspect that she deserved some credit for bringing about the arrangement. And as she spoke of the prospects brightening before him, animation lighting up her fine eyes, and sending an unwonted glow through the pure alabaster of her cheeks, he thought he had never seen her look so handsome. Oddly enough, for the first time since he had known her, he felt much inclined for a little love-making; but though fascinated by an unwonted softness in her manner, he honourably resisted the temptation.

It was almost a duty to say all that was

civil to Miss Winstanley, but it was both a duty and a pleasure to tell his cousin Grace. On the memorable day when the matter was decided, he had arranged to dine in Eaton Place. It was more than possible that there might be other guests, and he was anxious to see his cousin alone. So he sent a note, telling her frankly that he had something to communicate which she would be pleased to hear, and hoping he might find her in the drawing-room half an hour before dinner. Grace had her own share of feminine curiosity, and was dressed and down-stairs ten minutes before the time. She was going to a dance under Lady Fortrose's wing in the evening, and was attired in a prettily-fancied toilet. Perhaps Leslie might have liked her all the better in virgin white, with only a string of pearls and a ribbon or so. But Jack Venables, whose artistic tastes were more worldly, freely used his cousinly privileges, and went into unfeigned raptures over a *chef-d'œuvre* of Madame Antoinette's. If Miss Winstanley was handsome, Miss Moray was more what might be called pretty; but with her high-bred air toned down by the sweet

simplicity which even her Belgravian experiences and conquests could not efface, she might have stepped down from a canvas of Vandyck's, allowing for changes in the fashions. What a lovely young matron the girl would make, to do the honours of the drawing - room of a rising politician ! Yet he thought at the moment that the world might be well lost if he could marry her, and live quietly down at Glenconan. Grace welcomed him none the less warmly for his evident admiration ; but she laughingly cut his compliments short.

“ You never made a special assignation with me, Jack, to glorify Madame Antoinette’s designs ; and as I told papa that you were bringing a budget of news with you, it is more than likely he may interrupt us at any moment.”

“ You don’t say so, Grace ! And to punish you for your treachery, I have more than a mind to say nothing till he does come ; only that in punishing you, I should sacrifice myself, and deny myself the pleasure I have been counting upon all day.” Then he changed his manner, and spoke with more lover-like

softness. "I make so sure that you are interested in all that concerns me, that I come straight to you with the intelligence of my last piece of good-luck." He did not deem it needful, by the way, to make any allusion to his parenthetical talk on the subject with Miss Winstanley.

"Oh, I am so glad, Jack! What is it?"

Then he gave her the story at length. Nor had he any cause to complain of want of sympathy. Grace was delighted, and showed her pride in his progress; for, like the best of women, she was inclined to worship success. And as his prospects lost nothing by Jack's painting, and as he had the most heartfelt faith in the promises of his future, from private secretary of the Lord Privy Seal to First Minister of the Crown seemed to her a very possible transition. Her father, when he joined them, if less excited, was almost equally well pleased. He had always believed the boy had stuff in him; but as a man of action, he had never quite forgiven Jack in his heart for not accepting his offers of introductions in the East. Now the refusal seemed amply justified. With Jack's versatility, he

could pick and choose among the openings that his ready intelligence made for himself. “The boy is born to get on ; and he is honourable and straightforward to boot, as I have good reason to say, when I remember what passed at Glenconan. Who would have thought, when I half encouraged him in his audacity there, that he would so soon have gained the position he has at present ? So that the legacy of £10,000 becomes comparatively a bagatelle. If he only continues going forward as he has begun, Grace might do worse from a worldly point of view.”

At that very moment the door was flung open — not to announce dinner, but “Mr Leslie.” Leslie, like Venables, was always made welcome in Eaton Place, on the chance of his uncle dining at home. “Ah, I was forgetting Ralph, poor fellow !” mused Moray. “Well, he must take his chance, like other men ; for me, I can only say of Grace—‘How happy might she be with either !’ ”

Leslie walked in very briskly for him, looking unusually bright and well. Grace, who was full of what she had just heard, burst out and told him all about it. Not one of

Jack's many friends were to be more cordial in congratulations. As Leslie seized him by both hands, and told him frankly how very glad he was, Jack felt humiliating pangs of self-reproach. Had not a very considerable part of his satisfaction come from the thought that he had made a fresh advance on Ralph? —that the hare was running right away, and that the tortoise was left hopelessly behind? Yet Leslie had saved his life; and that evening, in the wild hills of Lochrosque, he had vowed and felt eternal gratitude. However, his confusion was not remarked, or was set down to anything rather than the real cause. And when the dinner was over and the servants had withdrawn, as the party returned to the subject, his self-complacency was nearly restored. After all, a man cannot altogether control his thoughts,—and it is something to be sincerely ashamed when they are discreditable. When the subject seemed pretty well exhausted, he changed it: vanity whispered that more than enough had been made of what, a year or two later, might appear trivial in the retrospect. And it was then that Leslie, speaking more deliberately than usual, re-

marked that he too had something to say that might interest them. "Although," as he modestly added, "it is much less exciting than Jack's communication."

"Never mind," said Moray; "let us hear and judge for ourselves."

Grace smiled kindly on him, but did not apparently expect to be much startled a second time. As for Jack, he was necessarily pre-occupied: nevertheless he constrained himself to listen politely, and to be ready to say something civil.

"The truth is," said Leslie—and he looked at Grace,—"the truth is, that I have taken the bull by the horns at last, and brought out a little volume of poems. It embodies some of my pleasantest memories of the Highlands, and one or two dramatic scenes at Glenconan."

Whereupon, and at the mention of scenes in Glenconan, Grace expressed unmistakable interest. As for her father, who did not greatly care for poetry, he merely said that he hoped the book might be successful. But he spoke in the doubtful tone that forebodes discreditable failure. Had Leslie been less generous, he might have enjoyed his revenge,

when he went on to explain quietly that the volume seemed to have scored a certain success already, though it had only made its appearance, and anonymously, in the beginning of last week. Jack Venables pricked up his ears, and broke out, "Surely you don't mean '*The Idyls of the North*'? You don't mean to tell us that you are the author?"

"That is just what I do mean. But here are the first-fruits of fame, with a vengeance! I did not think that poetry was much in your line, Master Jack."

"No more it is, as a general rule, and I am ashamed to say that I have not looked beyond the back of the '*Idyls*.' But an exceedingly handsome book it is—externally; and it is just like you depreciating it as a little volume. It is lucky that you are not left to blow your own trumpet in the way of criticism. The fact is, I was dining last night at the Winstanleys'—it was rather a literary party; they got talking of this new poem, and half the men were in raptures over it. Cutler, the editor of the '*Critical World*,' was there, and he said he remembered no volume of poems in his time, except by the Laureate, or Browning,

or one of the big swells, that had been so promptly and favourably received."

"So my publishers assure me," said Leslie. "In the course of the last few days there have been reviews in the '*Times*' and the '*Saturday Review*,' the '*Athenæum*' and the '*Critical World*'—all of them only too flattering. I can only attribute the prompt appearance of the articles to friendly interest made in my favour. Before publishing, I had taken the opinion of one of the illustrious authors Venable named—not the Laureate, by the way—and he expressed himself so pleased by some of the little poems, that he insisted upon carrying the manuscript away, to show in strict confidence."

"I do not know how that may be," said Jack, "but no one seemed to think that the reviews were too flattering—quite the reverse. Old Cutler paid you the compliment of remembering a couplet or two from '*The Highland Widow*,' I think he called it, and declaiming it over his claret with most seductive effect and emphasis."

There Grace again caught Leslie's eye ; and Jack, who intercepted the look, was far from

liking it. He could make his cousin's eye to dance and sparkle, but Leslie was telegraphing dangerous sympathy. However, he was resolved to expiate his fault in having crowded over Leslie when he got his appointment ; and chivalrously, although considerably against the grain, he went on singing *in solo* at second-hand the praises that had resounded round the Berkeley Square dinner-table. Grace listened with an attention that was doubtfully gratifying. When he had done his duty, and seemed to have run down, she rose and left the dining-room. Immediately afterwards the bell in the drawing-room was heard to ring sharply. And when the gentlemen, some time afterwards, followed her up-stairs, they found her sitting up to the ankles in news-sheets. She had sent a servant to knock up the nearest news-agent. She came forward to meet Leslie, with both hands extended.

“ Oh, Ralph, if you were only proud as I am ! But you seem to take it all as if it were a matter of course ; and perhaps you are right.”

“ Don't fancy that,” Ralph hastened to protest. “ If it really should prove a success, it

has taken me entirely by surprise. If I sometimes dared to dream that I had something of the poet in me, I distrust the popularity that takes the public by storm."

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Moray impatiently, for he could neither understand nor sympathise with his nephew's sensibilities. "Byron woke up one morning to find himself famous, and you may safely condescend to make a reputation in the same way."

"And success is the test of merit or genius," added Jack, sententiously. "You may depend upon that."

"Only listen to this, and to this, and to this," chimed in Grace, picking up two or three of the papers, and rapidly reading extracts from them. It must be owned that Leslie never found her voice so musical, and the flattery that fell from her lips sounded not only sweet but true. And still more seductively sweet were her accents when she began to favour them with some passages from the poems. She knew best why she did not begin with an extract from "The Highland Widow," though it was uppermost in her thoughts. But she charmed them with a picture of the wooded

ravine in Glenconan at daybreak—which made Moray bring his hand down on the table, declaring that he saw the very scene before him. And she quoted an idealised and slightly humorous sketch of Donald Ross, which made Venables burst out laughing.

“ When the old fellow recognises it, as he is sure to do, I don’t know whether he will be gratified or owe you a grudge. You have hit his foibles off to a hair, and yet you have touched his good points so prettily that he might be a saint or a hermit instead of a Highland keeper. The portraiture is inimitable, and yet it is hardly Donald. It is Donald as he might appear in Paradise with some lingering taint of the flesh, and with as strong a smell of the hunting-field still about him as if he were an Esau just come home from the chase. The poet’s pen, with a discreet use of a fanciful imagination, leaves the painter with his brushes leagues behind. Do you remember, Grace, how I tried to touch off your friend Donald for you ? but only put my daub alongside of Ralph Leslie’s verses, and then tell me how you should place the two.”

Now this was exceedingly generous of Jack,

—far more generous than any one, except perhaps Grace, suspected. The praises of the poems were gall and wormwood to his more worldly nature. Grace's undisguised admiration for them was fresh fuel with a blast of the bellows to the smouldering fires of his jealousy. But the self-reproaches, before Ralph had come forward in this new character, had given him timely warning to stand on his guard. So with a manly effort he pulled himself together, bringing his will to the succour of his better feelings. It is a question for casuists how far he had conquered, seeing that his heart was at variance with his lips. But Grace, who had not been unconscious of the strife, gave him all credit for his victory; and it was apparently destined that when either of the rivals made a start, the other was to come closely treading upon his heels.

## CHAPTER XVII.

MORAY MAKES UP A SHOOTING-PARTY.

IT is a ridiculous arrangement which keeps London society simmering in double-baked bricks and smoking mortar down to the very dregs of the dog-days. The lords and the ladies of the loveliest scenery in the three kingdoms, deliberately prefer the dull prose of “society” to the poetry of nature, and leave the freshness of the fields and the fragrance of the flowers for confinement behind the prison-bars of their basement areas. Among caviare and curries, and other acquired tastes, surely none is more capriciously extravagant than that of inhaling the noxious gases of the town, when the good of the land of England, to say nothing of the Continent, lies before them. To turn day into night in crushes, with the thermometer at  $85^{\circ}$ , making the

digestion of dyspeptic dinners an impossibility ; to tempt the overjaded appetite with truffled *pâtés* and plovers' eggs and champagne, when they should be sweetly locked in the embraces of Morpheus ; to waken from weariness to the drudgery of the inevitable round—for to-morrow is as yesterday and as many days before it. It is all a matter of taste and fashion, of course ; but were they condemned to the life they are pleased to lead voluntarily, the lot of convicted criminals might seem enviable by comparison. These at least have a chance of getting into condition on the tread-mill ; and after the jail delivery they come out with the satisfaction of having economised their constitutions, in place of having drawn heavy drafts upon them. Yet it is almost pitiful to see how natural sensibilities survive in spite of the demoralisation that is consecrated by tradition. A blighted clematis or blackened ivy trails its tendrils sadly round the dining-room windows ; and the millionaire, self-banished from his gardens, gives a florist *carte blanche* to renew the bloom in the flower-boxes in the windows. Those who have Edens of their own within easy reach, go for the daily drive or

ride by the Serpentine, and gladden their eyes with the beds of Park Lane, which are the natural delight of the London destitute. But there is good in everything, as Shakespeare remarked ; and it is an ill wind that blows good to no one. London tradesmen grow rich in spite of the competition of the co-operative stores ; and fashionable physicians fatten on the maladies of their fellow-mortals.

We do not deny that there are bell-wethers to lead the flock, who are never really happy anywhere out of London. We know that the disreputable old Duke of Queensberry, who loved society, probably because he did not care to be alone with his conscience, declared that it was the best place to live in, in the season or out of it, because there were always more people in it than anywhere else ; nor can we imagine a George Selwyn making himself happy in Gloucestershire, or a Horace Walpole in Norfolk. But as a rule, in most *habitués* of Mayfair and St James's, there is still so much of the healthy human instinct, that they welcome the day of their release from the grimy bondage they impose on themselves. Nay, they may argue with much philosophical

truth, that they evolve good out of evil, and pleasures from previous suffering. As the wise man who is setting his face towards the Riviera in the winter, will wait till our frosts and fogs have made him thoroughly miserable here ; so the Alps or the Highlands, even the dulness of the German baths, will seem delightful by way of contrast to the purgatory of Pall Mall. And if that be the experience of the hardened votaries of fashion, who are lulled to sleep by the rattle of the wheels, and try to see reflections of their heaven in the glare of the gas-lamps, how much more must it be the case with those who are caught up in the fashionable whirl, chiefly because they are able to afford its dissipations ! Had it not been for the sake of his daughter, Moray would never have spent more than a week or two in London. The house in Eaton Place, which he was bound to inhabit, was an incubus that often lay heavy on him. As for Grace, she was young and fond of gaiety : she had been followed and flattered by compliments, paid gracefully or clumsily ; and she had made sundry conquests, more or less serious, which she estimated pretty much at

their value, but which, nevertheless, pleased her. She liked dancing ; the mere excitement of the exercise freshened her up, however fagged she might be ; and to the very end of the season, like a well-bred but overtired hunter, she pricked her ears to the sound of the waltz, and went best pace over the floor, with elbow - room and a satisfactory partner. Nor did she look so pale as might have been expected, when she came down the next morning to breakfast. Yet even Grace, though in her first season, began to feel that she had enough of the pleasures of the town. She found herself envying her friends who had already gone off to the country. Notwithstanding her southern training, she was a true Highland lassie at heart : often the Serpentine would fade from before her eyes, giving place to the wild shores of Lochrosque or Lochconan ; while, though dinners at Richmond or Greenwich were all very well, she would have given the views from the Terrace or the Trafalgar for a glimpse of Ben More or Funachan. The Morays had stayed on in town longer than they had intended. Moray, who always did with all his might all that his hand

designed to do, declared that he had work in East London which must be disposed of, before he could leave with an easy mind.

But at last the day of their departure had come, though not before the second week of August. It is hard to say which of the two had looked forward with more enjoyment to their return to the hills. Moray's original intention and desire had been to have his daughter all to himself for a week or two ; but accidents, or rather his natural hospitality, had been too much for him. Had they gone north a little sooner, the *tête-à-tête* might have been managed, but the delay had put it out of the question. The Twelfth would be upon them in a day or two : Donald had sent the most glowing account of the grouse prospects ; and it would be churlish and dog-in-the-mangerish to keep the birds all to one's self. Moray felt bound to ask Jack Venables for the grand day ; and Jack, who had been looking out for the invitation as a matter of course, had already, with his usual fore-thought, secured himself leave of absence. Jack once asked, it became imperative to include Leslie in the party, not only because

otherwise he might well have felt hurt, but on the principle of holding the balance even between the two. Leslie, in his civility, had made a hesitating answer.

" You know I don't much care about shooting ; and if you want to fill the bags, and figure creditably in the county papers on the Twelfth, you had better let me postpone my visit. I shall always find the rocks and the river, the balmy air on fine days, and the storms sweeping down from Funachan ; and you know that is what I like the best."

But neither Moray nor Grace would hear of that.

" Come to us, you must and shall," said the former ; " that is to say, unless you have any more enticing engagement. It would not be a family party without you ; and a family party I mean to have, after those months of living at a loose end in London here. And as for shooting or not shooting, of course you can do as you please. You should be much more the master of Glenconan than I am, now that you have identified your genius with the place. You must come to be inspired for a second volume, that shall assure immortality

to our sequestered glens. No doubt you will become a nuisance to us sooner or later ; but that is one of the penalties of fame. We shall have troops of tourists trespassing on our solitudes, crowds of poetry-stricken pilgrims scaring the deer. I believe Donald Ross to be devoted to the Celtic bards ; but after all, as they sang in strains which nobody understands, they are as little appreciated as Ossian by the Southerns. When Donald realises all you have done, and learns that you have pulled the string of a perpetual douche-bath of trespassers, he will bear you a grudge you will never get over."

As may be gathered from that unusually prolix speech, Ralph Leslie had greatly advanced in his uncle's good opinion. In his good opinion, that is to say, so far as the gifts that help a man forward are concerned. For since it had become an open secret everywhere that Leslie was the author of the much-admired volume of poems, his company had been greatly courted ; and had he been the sort of man to have his head turned, it should have been wellnigh twisted off his shoulders. Moreover, it was just as little of a secret

that the book had sold extraordinarily well. Mudie, as well as Mr Smith and the minor purveyors for the public, had kept sending in fresh orders. With all the practical sleight-of-hand of the circulating librarians, they could not supply their customers sufficiently quick. Besides that, ‘The Idyls of the North’ was a book which, unlike the ephemeral “trash” turned out by us, the professional spinners of fictions, commanded a very considerable private sale. It was the sort of gift-book to be interchanged by sentimental young ladies who found the masculine spirit it breathed act as a tonic on their languishing temperaments. It was the kind of book that a sighing lover might send to his mistress, with passages marked that gave eloquent utterance to the vague thoughts he could hardly hope to express. Moray cared little for the pecuniary aspects of the matter—he did not much believe in the possibility of making a fortune by the pen—but he did think a good deal of the celebrity. He admired the genius he had scarcely cultivation enough to appreciate; and confessed that Leslie was treading a far loftier path than

that which as a dashing adventurer he had walked over with tolerable success. And if the sober Moray was so far impressed, we may imagine that his more romantic daughter had followed suit. She said nothing to back up her father's pressing invitation ; indeed she saw that it was quite unnecessary. But Leslie, when he looked up to consult her eyes, had no longer any hesitation in assuring his uncle that he would gladly take him at his word.

What with rambling passages and wasted space, there was no great number of guest-chambers in the old house of Glenconan. But when once the *tête-à-tête* had been broken in upon by the presence of his two nephews, Moray decided to make the most of his accommodation. Two or three other men had been picked up for the opening of the shooting season, all of them keen sportsmen, and reported to be crack shots. There was Mr Calverley Baker, member for Pontypool, partner in the wealthy firm of Welsh ironmasters, and one of the most promising of the young Opposition speakers in the House. There was the M'Claverty, chieftain of the clan of that

name, and a far-away cousin of the laird's, who drew a handsome revenue from his barren heritage, now that it had been parcelled out in deer-forests, grouse-moors, and sheep-farms. And there was General Battersby, who, though getting on in years, was active as ever, who had been a gay young subaltern five-and-twenty years before, when Moray had made his acquaintance in garrison at Hong Kong.

When Jack Venables heard of these additions to the party, he would have undoubtedly made a wry face, had not his features been under command. Old Battersby was all very well, and a capital companion either on the hill or in the smoking-room, though, with a touch of the formal courtesy of the older school, he was always saying something complimentary to Miss Moray. But Calverley Baker and the M'Claverty might just as well have been omitted. They were unmarried, rich, rattling, and consequently eligible ; and Jack, though self-confident, was not unnaturally somewhat jealous, and looked upon all men as possible rivals. However, as there was no help for it, he resigned himself to the

inevitable ; and after all, he felt in his heart that as Leslie was “favourite” in the race, “the ruck” counted for little. He cared still less, one way or another, when he heard that a certain Mr Maitland, formerly a merchant in Shanghai, with his wife, who was rather a friend of Grace’s, were to fill up the house. A few days afterwards, however, his uncle had incidentally returned to the subject.

“ I have just had a call from Maitland, who came to throw me over ; and a nuisance it is, for I hate having my plans upset ; though I have no right to be out of temper, and it is worse for him than for me. It seems his liver is out of order, and Jenner has ordered him away to Carlsbad. I always thought he was too hard on that old Madeira of his, though I must say it was enough to tempt any man. How well I remember it myself in Shanghai ; and the East is the only climate to enjoy the wine. However, he can’t come, and I am exceedingly sorry. You see I am filling the house with guns, and his wife would have been a nice companion for Grace. I hardly know whom to ask in place of them.”

“ No difficulty about that, sir, I should say. I could name a score of your acquaintances off-hand who would give their ears to go down to Glenconan.”

“ Possibly. But a party in a Highland shooting-quarter is like a salad : a mistake in the mixing simply poisons it. Now I thought the Maitlands would have given it flavour, without disturbing the harmony. But come, Jack, I see you have an idea—you always have—so let me hear what you suggest.”

“ I was only thinking, sir, that you and Mr Winstanley get on capitally together ; and I believe that he would be too glad to make one of the party.”

“ The Winstanleys ? Why, it was only the other day he told me that they were all going, for a month or more, to his brother’s place in Shropshire.”

“ If you care to have him, ask and try. I am willing to lay two to one on the result.”

“ You speak oracularly, Master Jack. What do you mean ? ”

“ Why, just this. I ought to know Mr Winstanley pretty well by this time ; and after having had something like six months of

domestic bliss, I fancy he would welcome a bachelor holiday, if he could only find a decent excuse. He likes your company beyond all things ; he likes Leslie, he likes me ; and after all I have told him of the place, I know he has a longing to see Glencoran.”

“ Well, if we can prevail on him, I am sure I should be delighted. And if he brought his daughter, she could keep Grace company instead of Mrs Maitland. The girls seem to get on very well together.”

“ I don’t think that would do,” exclaimed Jack, with great decision. “ Mr Winstanley could hardly bring his daughter without offering to take his wife,—which, to be candid, I don’t think he would consent to do, even supposing you could put the whole of the family up.”

For though Jack believed his regard for Miss Winstanley to be purely platonic, on the whole he foresaw considerable embarrassment in having both of the beauties on his arms at once. At all events, his argument seemed unanswerable to his uncle, who declared that he could not undertake to make both the ladies comfortable. Moreover, Mrs Winstan-

ley rather oppressed him ; and when he went down from Eaton Place to the Highlands, he fully meant, metaphorically, to exchange the Court suit and ruffles of his London life for the ease of a loose shooting-jacket and knicker-bockers.

But with the Hon. Mrs Winstanley's husband, it was a different affair altogether. Brought together originally by Jack Venables, the ex-diplomatist and the ex-merchant had struck up something very like a friendship. When Winstanley had reminded Moray of having met him long before at our Minister's table in Pekin, the Highlander had rather abruptly changed the subject. As we know from his frank talk with Leslie, those early Eastern reminiscences of his were at once a pleasure and a pain. How gladly would he have lived the life over again in all senses, with the exhilarating stimulus of its perpetual excitement, and the mistakes that might be rectified or avoided ! But though, with his regrets and its pleasures, it was perpetually in his mind, he did not care to talk of it with strangers, still less with a singularly well-informed man like Winstanley, who might be

supposed to know some of the secrets of the trade by which Moray had made his money. Nevertheless, it proved to be something like the case of Johnson's meeting with Foote at Fitzherbert's dinner-table : " I was resolved not to be pleased ; . . . but the dog was so very comical, that I was obliged to lay down my knife and fork and laugh it out. No, sir —he was irresistible." Winstanley was so pleasant a companion that Moray was pleased in spite of himself. And Moray came to draw to him at last, for the very reasons for which he had at first shunned him. Winstanley, though an honourable man according to his lights, was no fastidious moralist. He drew a line which, as a British diplomatist, he had never passed himself ; but he admired the dash of the free-traders who had gone beyond, being fettered by no official responsibilities. He was far too well-bred to persevere with disagreeable subjects in ordinary circumstances ; and he could not help remarking that, when he touched on oriental matters, Moray was ever ready to turn the talk. He may have attributed that reserve merely to the natural modesty of the man. At all events,

he would work round to the topic again and again, showing an interest in it that was somewhat out of keeping with his character. Had he appeared to have any ulterior motive, Moray would have shut up like an oyster, and let it be understood very unmistakably that he would not be forced to speak. But Moray's penetration seldom deceived him, and he was persuaded that this man of wider experiences than his own was veritably amused and interested. As Winstanley had said once, in a moment of unwonted expansion on both sides—

“It does delight my heart to listen to you, Moray. You are as good as a romantic volume of travel, sport, and adventure, with all the padding left out; or rather you are worth a whole library of volumes, when we can prevail on you by some chance to do yourself justice. There is nothing I should like much better, even at my time of life, than to take a passage in a P. and O. boat to Hong Kong, and to go coasting down the Malay Peninsula to see what that new company proposes doing in Sumatra, and whether it is worth while going in for investments. Un-

fortunately it is too late ; Mrs Winstanley would sue for a separation if I proposed it ; and fancy the horrors of a voyage in the tropics if one were laid on the back by a fit of the gout ! No, going is out of the question ; so the next best thing is making the journey under the guidance of a man who is the personally-conducting Cook of tropical tours in the fancy.”

That Moray believed to be the actual state of the case ; and believing it, he became so ready to talk, that at last it was he who would sometimes lead the conversation in that direction. Winstanley, as a rule, was by no means addicted to letting anybody else indulge in monologues. He liked to hear himself : to do him justice, he was generally worth listening to, and nobody was more quickly bored. But he treated Moray as something between a melodramatic piece at the Porte St Martin and a sensational romance by Jules Verne. He could come and take him up at any time, without being tied to hours or to cramped stalls in the pit ; without even the trouble of holding a cumbersome book, or the necessity of denying himself his cigarette. So

it came about, that very often of an evening the two men met in one of their smoking-rooms, for it was only coarse tobacco Winstanley objected to. The emotional side of Glenconan's Celtic nature would get uppermost : he would rise out of his lounging-chair and tramp across the room, half acting the scenes he so dramatically described ; while his audience of one would keep him up to the mark by paying him the compliment of the most intelligent attention.

Really, on these by no means rare occasions it would have been worth while to put either eye or ear to the keyhole. Winstanley would leave a business-like Board meeting in the City, or the whist-room at the "Travellers," to pass the latter hours of the night in a gilded mirage of cigarette and cheroot smoke, conjuring up a succession of mental pictures that were vividly stamped on the mental retina next morning, and which his memory was always recalling through the day. Well might Jack Venables opine that he would be willing to accept an invitation to Glenconan. Jack seldom spoke confidently except on a certainty ; and more than once Winstanley

had expressed a warm admiration for his uncle.

“ You neglect your opportunities, Jack, in not joining us more often, though perhaps the nabob might be less animated in that case; for he seems to think that two are company and three are none. Till I got him into the habit of those *tête-à-tête* rehearsals of the past, I had not the faintest idea of half that is in him. If he has not been everywhere—for there, at least, I have the advantage of him—he has done almost everything man could do within the sphere of his indomitable activity. Sometimes I think he is just the fellow to do it all over again; sometimes I don’t—for occasionally, when the excitement dies down, I could almost fancy that he looks back regretfully, which, of course, must be absurd. But I tell you, sir, again, you ought to hear him when he shows to most advantage; it is better than any number of plays, even as plays used to be when I was a boy.”

“ Why, sir,” Jack might say, “ if ever my uncle should come to grief, according to you, he might make his fortune on the boards.”

“ Or in lecturing on ‘Passages from my

Past,' in the States—the sort of thing that seems to be the fashion nowadays. But no—that would never do ; he is far more self-conscious than any of his friends suppose, and he wants a select and appreciative audience of a solitary listener. As I said, however, you ought to hear him. Now we are becalmed off the banks of surf, breaking over coral-reefs, with unearthly stillness brooding in the air, before the tornado bursts from the storm-clouds ; and nothing to be heard in the meantime but the creaking of the blocks on board, or the screams of the sea-fowl floating towards the shore. Now we have got up the back of a tyrannical Rajah, who is hesitating between ordering us off to immediate execution, or handing us over to the tender mercies of the tormentors ; or we are threading the jungles, looking over our shoulders in terror, expecting a flight of poisoned arrows out of the thickets ; or we are awakening from pleasant dreams of Scotland in a hammock slung in the shade of a spice-grove, to see a cobra or an anaconda hung up by its tail, with its forked tongue within an inch or so of our opening eyelids. But I only say again, you ought to hear him."

While, if Winstanley was willing to go down to Glenconan, Moray, now that it had been suggested, liked the idea of having him there. Though in the bottom of his heart—or rather, in the depths of his conscience—he was inclined to distrust this new friend as an evil genius. That good-humoured companion, with his easy philosophy, was the very opposite of Ralph Leslie. Had Moray been under sentence of death, it was Leslie he would have sent for to play the confessor. But when the world, with its wicked old memories, got the upper hand, Winstanley was assuredly the more agreeable companion. A man, too, whose honour there was no impeaching, and who was welcomed as the embodiment of integrity on the best Boards in the City. Yet, upright as he was, and with his unblemished antecedents, Moray would never have dreamed of submitting his scruples to him. Not because Winstanley would have condemned, but quite the contrary. He would have ridiculed the scruples he could not even understand—if ridicule had not been a breach of good manners; and Moray, though he might wish to be convinced, had no desire to be deluded.

## CHAPTER XVIII.

## A BUDGET OF NEWS, GOOD ——.

FOR reasons best known to herself, it occurred to Miss Winstanley that it would be pleasant to accompany her father to the North. Not by any means that Wrekin Castle was likely to be dull, for her uncle was sure to fill it with company. Her first idea was to sound Mr Venables in all good-fellowship, as to the possibility of getting an invitation. On second thoughts, and again for reasons best known to herself, she changed her mind, and applied to her father. Winstanley was no such doting parent as Moray; and yet Julia, though with more trouble and diplomacy, generally succeeded like Grace in getting her way. Had she not known him well, when she broke the matter to him, his manner of receiving the proposal would have effectually discouraged her.

“Nonsense, my dear. It would not be the thing at all—quite out of the question, as your own good sense must tell you. In the first place, you ought to stay with your mother; in the next, and that is still more decisive, I don’t know Moray sufficiently well to take a liberty with him. Those Highland houses are always filled for the Twelfth, and you may rely upon it that no rooms are going a-begging.”

He felt immediately that if he meant to be firm, he had better have stuck to a flat refusal. By weakly giving reasons, he admitted the thing was not impracticable; and Miss Julia, seeing her way, immediately set herself to argue.

“Mamma is always glad I should amuse myself, and she is always perfectly happy at the Castle. Besides, I need only be away for a fortnight or three weeks at the most. As for not taking a liberty with Mr Moray, is it not rather rash to say anything of that when you know how he has been running after your society of late? Mr Venables has remarked it more than once, and said he never knew him so quickly taken by any one. As for his

house being full, you have often told me that Highland mansions are made of india-rubber, and can always be made to stretch as the owner pleases. And I do think, between you and me, papa, I should be rather an acquisition than an encumbrance to the shooting-party—especially if the weather were wet."

Winstanley looked at her, and could not honestly deny it. He hesitated, and his daughter saw he was lost. She was a lively travelling companion, and gave little trouble. If he chose to go on to Skye or anywhere else, he could always send her south and remain *en garçon*. He might possibly add to his pleasure ; she could not seriously interfere with his comfort ; and that being the case, he was glad to gratify her. Prudence suggested no particular objections, looking at the matter from the match-making point of view, which the veteran speculator always kept vaguely before him. Jack Venables and the poet were both as good as engaged to their cousin, since both seemed to have set their hearts upon winning her. For Leslie made little concealment of the hopes which Jack had avowed. And neither of the other young men who made

up the party could be called detrimentals, if the worst came to the worst. Miss Winstanley kissed him, when he promised “to see what could be done”; but was only moderately grateful. Not that she did not consider the visit as good as arranged; but, as her habit was, she had read what was passing in his mind, and surmised how far selfish considerations had weighed with him. Perhaps she overrated these and undervalued his affection; but if it were so, the fault was very much his own. He went on to say, somewhat dolefully—

“ But there are always the two difficulties to be got over. There is the indiscretion of seeming to force you on Moray—and his daughter; he has never hinted at a wish to receive any ladies. And what is more serious, though less embarrassing, there is the certainty of a battle-royal with your mother.”

Had Miss Winstanley spoken out frankly, she might have said that she ought to be hardened to those single combats with her mother by this time. What she did say was, “ Oh, I undertake to settle it all with mamma, so you need have no sort of annoyance. As

for the Morays, I am sure nobody knows better than you how to turn an apparent indiscretion into a compliment. So far as Grace is concerned, we have always got on so well that I believe she may rather like having me on my own account. Besides, you should know enough of us girls by this time to be sure that she will be grateful to any one who can relieve her of superfluous lovers, and leave her to make herself quietly happy in her own way."

Whatever may have passed between Miss Winstanley and her mother, apparently she had not overestimated her influence. And Moray's hospitable nature would have left him powerless to refuse her visit, even had he not thought she would be a pleasant companion for Grace. Rather than refuse, indeed, he would have had a booth or "bothy" knocked up for himself at the shortest notice, where he would have slept on a camp-bed or a mattress of heather-shoots. Grace merely lifted her eyebrows slightly when she heard of the proposal. She liked Miss Winstanley well enough, but she rather resented a liberty she traced to the young lady. And, rightly

or wrongly, she suspected a motive in it,—not that she was jealous—certainly not.

I have said that June in itself is the most delightfully exhilarating of all months in the Highlands ; but there is no denying the superior excitement of the opening days of the grouse-shooting. The days are still long : the daybreaks and the sunsets are glorious ; the chances should be in favour of settled weather ; and the great work of the week is apparent in the minds of everybody. Of course I do not speak of exceptional years, when the moors have been swept by the deadly grouse disease, leaving behind it a solitude strewed with skeletons, or only enlivened by the cynical crowing of some tough, seasoned old cocks, apparently as proof to the pestilence as they are shy of the guns. Nor do I know that the first of the season is specially enjoyable to gentlemen who live all the year round in the North. They go to work with intense earnestness, no doubt, despatching their business with deceptive airs of satisfaction. But after all, the sport comes to them in the routine of regular tasks : they

range from trout and salmon fishing through June, deer and many sorts of miscellaneous shooting ; and it is for a very few weeks in the year at the outside that they have to resign themselves to the trial of killing nothing whatever. There may be exceptions, of course ; but as a rule I suspect they have little more appreciation of the romantic than the Abyssinian savage who hunts the upper tributaries of the Blue Nile, or the ferryman who plies for fares beneath the Rapids of Niagara. Now it is another thing altogether with the men who get the key of the forests and the moors after a long-drawn season in London. If they be not utterly *blasé* or broken down, they feel like so many schoolboys let loose for the holidays. For a time at least the spirit rises superior to the flesh, and though it be but a flash in the pan, they hold their own upon the hills with the hillmen. But if that be the case with the men, it is far more so with the ladies, unless, indeed, they be thoroughbred Cockneys. The life of a woman in London is as artificial as the fashions in her dress. As she compresses herself in tight-fitting garments, fantastically cut to disfigure her

shape, and to balk her in all her natural movements, so she is condemned to breathe most objectionable air; while she can never stir abroad without an escort. She takes her evening recreation in overheated dining-rooms, heavily laden with those smells of the cookery which are by no means disagreeable in moderation,—or in reception-rooms which are something between a Russian bath and a smelting-furnace. Nor does she gain much by opening the windows at home, beyond inhaling the odours of gutters or gas-lamps, or of the back-smoke that has been filtered through unswept chimneys, and impregnated by the refuse of the mews behind. Yet she holds on to the day of her release, in a stern sense of self-sacrificing duty; and it shows that we have our everyday martyrs among us, who should rank with the virgin legions of the Saint Ursulas. If she is a matron, she is bound to see her daughters married; if she is a maiden, she is bent on getting married herself; if she be neither one nor the other, but a spinster soured by disappointments, she is nevertheless bound, in obedience to the instincts of her sex, to immolate herself to the

society which shrinks from her as an incubus. But though the strong sense of duty may carry her along, a delicious reaction will come with the release. For a day or two, at all events, it would be a delightful change from West London to the dulness of any picturesque farmhouse in the country. And when she is transported to the grandest scenery in the islands, and let down easily by residence in a comfortable country-house, with pleasant company and all desirable luxuries, then for a few weeks the emancipated female is in Paradise. *Ennui* will come later: in the meantime she is sceptical or agnostical about it. Meantime it is rapture to go and to come, without ordering the carriage an hour or two before, or summoning a servant as protector. It is rapture to count on an appetite at dinner, notwithstanding reckless indulgence at a five o'clock tea, over sweet cakes and all manner of abominations; for nineteen-twentieths of women are *gourmandes*, though unintelligent *gourmandes*. It is rapture to stroll out to mark the sunsets, when the western horizon is glowing in golden lights, and each fleecy cloud in its lustrous beauty reflects poetical

inspiration from the showers of sparks flying back from the receding wheels of the sun-god's chariot. And it is most rapturous and invigorating of all, to breathe the freshness of the morning through open windows ; revelling in unwonted lightness of spirits in the sights and sounds of the mountain solitudes. Then, for the time at least, we are lifted out of ourselves ; the temptations of our everyday life are left behind us ; and the thoughts of young men and maidens in particular, will turn lightly and easily to dreams of love.

In that particular August the Highland weather was almost perfect. There was pretty nearly constant sunshine, yet the temperature was cooled by the breezes and the light-flying showers. So that a drift of fleecy clouds from time to time would break the monotony of the deep azure of the heavens ; and though the glass stood encouragingly above set fair, each morning the hills, the lakes, and the valleys were draped in fantastic wreaths of vapour. The fine-weather haze made a fire agreeable, when the peat sparkled through the crackling oak-logs, and then it extinguished itself naturally in the sun-rays that beat

hotly after breakfast on the gravel before the house. The party was in good humour with itself and all the world ; and the guests must have been the most fastidious of mortals had they not felt thoroughly contented. Allowances made for somewhat cramped accommodation, they were surrounded with every conceivable luxury. Even Calverley Baker, a born sybarite, whose brand-new palatial villa near Cardiff was renowned far and near as a marvel of sumptuous fitting up, gave unqualified praise to the comforts of his old-fashioned bedroom, where lounging-chairs covered with light-coloured cretonnes contrasted pleasantly with the low ceiling and the quaintly antiquated cupboards. It was admitted on all hands that the ingenious *chef* surpassed himself, though sorely tried by unpunctuality at meals. And after dinner, with the windows thrown open to the night, the conversation circulated as briskly as the Château Lafitte, to be followed by music and flirtations when the gentlemen joined the ladies, with a rubber at whist for those who liked it. Then in that easy life the austerity of the *convenances* might be safely disregarded. There were

strolls in the moonlight along the shores of the loch, when Venables or Leslie—even Mr Baker or the M'Claverty—had opportunities, if they chose, of becoming sentimental. In fact, ladies and gentlemen were on so pleasant a footing, that the latter at least were loath to separate ; and, except upon the great day of the Twelfth, sport became rather a recreation than a business. Even Battersby, who, being elderly, was supposed to be unimpressionable, was so far subjugated that he submitted with a good grace to be overruled, when he had murmured some protests against this heterodoxy. In fact, when he had tried to make a feeble stand, Jack Venables had been down upon him with that pleasant manner which deprecated resistance and gave no offence.

“ Why make a toil of a pleasure, my dear General ? Your intelligence may be clouded a little by the prejudices of habit ; but to a man of your gallantry, it must surely seem absurd to refuse the goods the gods provide you. You can shoot every year with Jack, Tom, or Harry—hardened bachelors like myself, who simply make a business of butchery. But it is

not more than once or so in a lifetime that you have the chance of strewing the game-panniers with summer flowers, and wreathing the gun-barrels in roses. If we do ruffle Donald's shaggy eyebrows by altering the beats—if we do waste an extra half-hour or so after luncheon—what does it matter? My motto when out holiday-making is, *Vive la bagatelle!* and I vote for the ladies joining us again tomorrow."

They were discussing their plans in the smoking-room, where neither of the fathers chanced to be present, so they might chat all the more freely. After Jack's persuasive apostrophe, the General looked around him and over his shoulder, but could see no supports coming up. On the contrary, both the M'Claverty and Mr Baker approved Jack's arguments by eloquent silence; while Leslie, as we know, had no personal interest in the subject, since he only took to the hill as an amateur and an onlooker. It was not to be expected that he should advocate misogyny under the circumstances. So the General, having delivered his conscience, shrugged his shoulders, and laughed.

"If I were Glenconan now, or Winstanley either, for that matter, I should distrust you hardened bachelors, Mr Venables. However, I suppose there is no help for it; there should be safety for the young ladies in company, and you can't do much harm on the open hill. Thank heaven, I never had a daughter!" he added, in a tone of such emphatic gratitude that, while the rest of the smoking-party burst out laughing, it brought something like a blush to Mr Venables's cheek. Seeing that the stray shaft seemed to have gone home, and thinking himself that Mr Venables's matrimonial schemes could be no affair of his, the General changed the subject.

"By the way, where are our worthy host and Winstanley? I suppose they are talking China, as usual, over their cheroots. Well, birds of a feather will flock together; but it appears to me they are getting abominably unsociable of an evening—a charge which no one can bring against any of you young gentlemen. I thought I should never have got you away from the piano to-night."

Winstanley and Moray were pacing the gravel together out of doors. The former,

though he pulled his cloak closer about him, was setting the night air and chances of rheumatism at defiance ; while the latter, in evening dress, with unbuttoned waistcoat, drew in the health of his native hills voluptuously, with all the force of his powerful lungs. He looked the picture of robust health and perfect human contentment. Winstanley, glancing at him, thought as much, and envied him. He said so too, with a laugh, in which there was some slight touch of bitterness ; and then proceeded, half-musing aloud, to draw a contrast between himself and his companion, considerably to his own disadvantage. Moray did not take up the challenge, as the other had perhaps meant he should. At that moment he felt at perfect peace with himself, with his conscience, and with all the world. If life after middle age is not very much a question of livers and blue pills, at all events we view it very differently under different circumstances. In the exhilaration of the change from Eaton Place to the Glen ; with the bracing that had come to him from hard walking and good shooting ; in the happiness of seeing his daughter blooming and bright,

and his guests in the best of spirits about him,—Moray had cast his worries to the winds, and reconciled himself to his prosperity. Even the presence of Leslie, with the recollections it evoked, had ceased for some days past to bring any reproach to him. So he answered Winstanley lightly enough.

“I know no one who need less envy me than you; yet, on my word, I have good cause to be grateful. In fact, to-night I feel almost heathenish, as if I should either offer a propitiatory sacrifice to the fates; or pray, like the tyrant of Samos, for some small piece of misfortune to trouble my prosperity.”

“Please don’t talk like that, my good fellow,” said the other. “Though I am neither romantic nor yet superstitious, you positively make me shudder. Misfortunes come soon enough and without praying for, you may take your oath of that; and in the meantime, with your health and your money, and all the rest, you may be content to take the good the gods provide you. But *apropos* to praying for breaks in prosperity, it strikes me that the clouds are banking up for a storm. And another thing strikes me, and that is, a chill

in the air coming down the valley. At any rate, I accept it as a warning that it is high time to go indoors."

There are changes in the mountain weather that come up mysteriously as they pass quickly,—changes that go by almost unnoted by the weather-glass. Moray drew his curtains to look out before going to bed, and could hardly have known the summer night for the same that had been beaming on him barely an hour before from its myriads of twinkling stars. The moon was still visible in her pale radiance, but the upper edge of the disc was cut straight across and blotted out by the black line of a swiftly descending cloud-belt. Three-fourths of the sleeping loch was still shimmering in a sheet of silver, that seemed slowly to rise and fall in the moonlight, with the peaceful respiration of a tranquil sleeper. Yet even as he looked, he was reminded of the Eastern myth, as he saw the silver swiftly swallowed up by the storm-demon of the darkness. One moment, each gnarled and stunted tree or each patch of heather that clung to the steep escarpments of the opposite mountain-walls, stood out as

if in the glare of some great electric light, slightly toned down and mellowed by the distance. The next, the cliffs themselves had faded into spectral shadows, which vanished in their turn into outer darkness with the total eclipse of the moon behind the clouds. It was a depressing sight, and he shuddered involuntarily as the breath of the night air came in colder puffs. He was ashamed of what he characterised as his morbid susceptibilities : he blew out the candles and stepped into bed. But sleep refused to come at his call : he tossed and turned; he threw off the clothes; he went off into feverish dreams, and woke from them more feverish and restless. And he gladly welcomed the first grey glimmerings of the dawn, as the short summer night gave place to the life of morning. When he rose and looked out again, the storm had passed over ; it must have discharged itself far away to the south, as he could hear by the mutterings of distant thunder-peals. At Glenconan, though the ground seemed to smoke with the lifting mists of the dawn, the sky and atmosphere were clear as before. Moray's romance seldom prompted him to eccentricities. But for

once in his life he felt disposed to a very early promenade, and he excused himself by the prospect of a plunge in the loch.

"A walk will do me all the good in the world," he said to himself. "It will shake off those absurd phantasmagoria that have beset me. Everybody in the house is asleep; nobody need be a bit the wiser." So, like a burglar devising his stealthy arrangements from the inside, he softly slid up the casement to its greatest width, passed his bulky person with some difficulty through the opening, and stepped gently on to the roof of the verandah that ran under the window. "If I have to enter again by escalade," he thought, "I can always find a ladder." And from the gently sloping roof of the verandah, he lowered himself down upon the grass with unwonted agility.

The prescription of air and exercise worked wonderfully. He felt decidedly better with the expansion of his lungs, as he sculled a boat across the loch to the isle of the heronry. He was almost himself again, as he set foot on the strip of silvery shingle, and dragged up his boat half high and dry. As yet there was

nothing like actual sunshine, though he could see the first faint reflections of the day already glimmering behind the distant peaks to the eastward. The aspect of everything about him was vague and mysterious. The rising fogs hanging about the birchen and alder copses took all manner of fantastic forms. A dozen times he could have imagined that the phantom of the martyred saint was dogging his steps or eluding his advance. The black tops of the Scotch firs, standing out like an archipelago of dark islands from the sea of billowy vapours, seemed appropriate places of habitation for the spectral-like herons, who occasionally flitted from amongst the boughs, and silently melted out of sight. But on the other hand, all such unwholesome fancies were cheerily dissipated by the merry concert of the birds who are silent through an August day. And as his spirits rose to the notes of thrush and blackbird, he stripped his clothes above a convenient block of projecting rock, and took a header into the deep cold water. The shock completed what the birds had commenced. Moray was a magnificent swimmer. The art a Highland education had begun, had been prac-

tised in the tepid Eastern seas, where you live in the water when you can, to escape from the furnaces of the land. Swimming low at first, as he got braced by the cool waves and exhilarated by the sense of rapid motion, he gradually raised head and shoulders at each stroke, cleaving the water in showers of spray, and leaving the long trail of the bubbles breaking behind him. Herons floated up from their fishing stations in the shallows; teals and ducks rose quacking from their feeding-grounds in the sedges; and no doubt there was unwonted commotion among the finny inhabitants of the usually peaceful pools. But if Moray scared the animal creation, his own calm was restored; and when he had rubbed himself down and slipped back into his garments, like Martin Chuzzlewit after gulping the sherry-cobbler, he was another man in every essential particular. Rowing homewards, and regaining the house in a glow, he could laugh at all his superstitious forebodings; and when he came down to the breakfast-table after an hour or two in the sheets, his daughter remarked on his rosy appearance, and all went merry as marriage-bells till the luncheon-hour.

“We have had a delightful morning—Julia and I,” she exclaimed, as the first of the shooting-parties arrived at the well, at which the young ladies were awaiting the guns.

“So have we,” her father rejoined, speaking confidently for his companions, “although possibly the sport might have been better. But it is a perfect day for shooting; and, considering the breakfast I made, I never in my life felt more ready for lunch. I vote we give the other loitering gentlemen no law; so you had better let us see what you have got for us.”

As he spoke, the stalking-hats of the other gentlemen were seen rising above the sky-line of the nearest hill; and very soon they all lay reclining in the fashion of the Greeks and Romans around an exceedingly tempting repast. It would have made a pretty picture for a Scottish Watteau; and we may safely say that at none of the meetings in the ‘Decameron’ did the minutes ever go by more gaily. All the more so that there was no story-telling, and that the chatter to the symphony of knives and forks was lively rather than witty. Little did Moray or his daughter think that it was but the treacherous lull be-

fore a terrible storm—that they were already in the shadow of a lasting sorrow, and that the messenger of evil was approaching on the legs of a Highland laddie.

“Now, what may Master Colin want?” queried Jack Venables, as he marked a sturdy Highland boy jump the little burn below, and come bounding up the bank in their direction.

“I’m sure I don’t know,” said Moray, carelessly. “Possibly Walker may have sent him after us with something he forgot to pack in the hampers.”

“No bad news, I hope,” exclaimed Grace, with something like a presentiment.

“Bad news! nonsense,” returned Moray, the more confidently that his daughter’s remark recalled his forebodings of the night. “He has brought a handful of newspapers, I see. Perhaps it was a thoughtful attention of Walker’s, as he knew we were lunching near the house. All the same, he ought to have remembered that I hate being bothered with politics on the hill.”

“Well, in another minute or so we shall know all about it,” said Jack. “Meantime,

Grace, I will trouble you for the half of that grouse."

" It was a telegram just come for Mr Venables," said the boy, " and Mr Walker had thought that as I was to carry that whatever, I had better bring the papers at the same time."

Jack tore open the telegram. " I only trust it is not an order of recall from his lordship." But as he read, his face lightened up. He read it again to make sure of the contents, and then threw it across to Winstanley. That gentleman perused the despatch in turn, and glanced at his young *protégé* significantly.

" It need be no secret between us, need it ? Suppose you give me the genuine pleasure of contributing to the gaiety of the company."

" By all means," rejoined Jack, brimming over with good humour ; " I presume the contents must be all right, and I can have no reason to make a mystery of them."

" By all means, then, papa," echoed Miss Winstanley, merrily. " Here are Grace and myself on the tenter-hooks of expectation, and Mr Venables permits you to gratify our laudable curiosity."

Mr Winstanley smiled, with a complacent satisfaction that attributed some of the credit of the coming disclosure to himself. Then looking round and seeing he had the ears of the party, he went on with a certain formality of manner, which showed the importance he attached to the communication.

"It is only another agreeable surprise in the marvellously successful career of our friend. Some months ago, Jack there consulted me as to venturing a trifle in an American mine. In the course of his peregrinations in the metropolis, he had picked up an acquaintance in the smoking-room of the Langham Hotel. What was his name, Jack? No wonder I forget it."

"Rufus P. J. George Washington Hicks!"

"Well, Rufus P. J. George Washington Hicks had had strange experiences between the Sierra Nevada and the Golden Gates. He had run a liquor-bar; he had traded in buffalo-robies; he had sunk his savings in building-lots, and seen them swallowed by a fire, when he had backed his luck by refusing to insure. He had feasted on porter-steaks, and canvas-backs, and champagne: he had been

grateful for crusts picked up in the gutter. Finally, he had come rather to the front again, when he tried his hand at cradle-washing and quartz-mining. He got a concession for a silver claim somewhere in Idaho; and the lodes were so promising, though ground had barely been broken, that before going further he took a trip to the old country, determined on having a good time of it. Whether he had a good time or not, I don't know; but it would appear that his transatlantic trip has been a godsend for Venables. He cottoned to our friend, or froze to him, as he repeatedly assured him; and at last, in a moment of expansion after midnight, made him a serious offer. For a trifle that was not a spot on the real value, as he said, Jack might speculate in a quarter of his chances. What were the terms, Jack, I really forget?"

"Eight thousand dollars down," rejoined Jack, promptly. He had got tired of Winstanley's prolixity, for he saw that Baker was yawning, while the M'Claverty had sunk back in the heather in a state of semi-somnolence. "Eight thousand dollars down, and it was all a question of the mountain-man's honesty.

The mine might be solid metal or ‘wild cat,’ and the American only too well aware of its worthlessness. So one day I drove him down to dinner at Greenwich. Mr Winstanley kindly consented to meet him. He pronounced, on the whole, in favour of Hicks’s honesty, and encouraged me to stake my dollars on the chance.”

“And to-day,” chimed in Winstanley, triumphantly, “we have a telegram, which tells us that Hicks is waiting to sell half the interest in the Tombstone Lode to a professional promoter for half a million of dollars paid on the nail; the balance for the remaining half to be represented by shares in a company.”

“I can’t quite follow what your American friend would call the calculations,” exclaimed Grace, with cousinly excitement. “But from what I can gather, this mine alone has made Jack a man of considerable property.”

“Exactly so, Miss Moray,” Winstanley replied. “Roughly speaking, the quarter of half a million of dollars is £25,000 sterling; and his reserved interest in shares, if the promoters have kept their eyes open, may represent unlimited possibilities of wealth.

Can Hicks carry out the bargain without your consent, Jack?"

"Really, I hardly know how that is. You see I never dreamed of his doing any business of the kind till he got back again to his own side of the Atlantic. Those promoters he speaks of must have thought it worth while to follow him to England on purpose to trade."

"In any case, if you take my advice again, you will lose not a moment in answering his despatch. There are always slips between the cup and the lip, and it should be the object of every wise man to minimise them. Jump on one of these shooting-ponies, if Glenconan will give you leave, and make tracks straight away across the moors for the post-office."

Jack jumped at the suggestion, and on to the pack-saddle, which had been adjusted to sling a pair of panniers. He rode off in a running fire of congratulations, which rang pleasantly in the ears of the fortunate youth. Before he swung himself on to the pony he had sought Grace's eye. It may have been that at that moment he saw everything in rosy colours, but he certainly did fancy that

what he read there meant more than mere cousinly sympathy. Then he looked at Julia Winstanley, who may have resented being placed second in order of precedence. For she took such unnatural pains to avoid meeting his glance, that he might have had every reason to feel pleasantly flattered had he been unconscientious enough to keep a couple of strings to his bow. As it was, to tell the honest truth, he gave little thought, except incidentally, to either of the young women. His mind was far too full, in the meantime, of the piece of marvellous luck that had befallen him.

"Already," so ran his thoughts, "with that money paid down, I should have very much more than an easy income. Without being anyways imprudent, I might try another short cut uphill, and enter for the parliamentary stakes to-morrow. Nor is there any possible reason why I should not marry money in the person of Miss Grace. But prudence says that it is better to wait a twelvemonth, and see what comes of the paid-up shares. It may be another case of a Great Comstock Lode, and I may be rolling up my millions like a

Mr Mackay—which reminds me that I ought to make assurance sure, and send the answer so that it may reach the City during business hours."

And never did the steady-going animal he bestrode have such a bucketing before or since. Jack rode without stirrups, and carried nothing in the shape of stick or spur. But he pressed his heels against Donald's shaggy flanks ; he tugged provocatively at Donald's iron jaws ; he cheered the animal on with whoop and halloo ; and unconsciously, as he worked up a shambling gallop over a down-hill stretch of turf, he would break into a snatch of song, to be cut short by a spasm of anxiety. When they pulled up before the straw-thatched post-office, Donald was dripping with sweat ; while his rider was hardly in better case, what with his state of mental excitement, and what with his bodily exertion in the heat. Already Jack was labouring beneath the burden of his riches, being anxious as to the timely despatch of the telegram ; and might have realised the wisdom of the petition in the Litany, which prays for deliverance in all time of our wealth.

## CHAPTER XIX.

— AND BAD.

THE intelligent reader must have remarked—sensational leaders in the newspapers are always drawing attention to the fact—that sensations seldom come singly. A railway smash seems to transmit similar shocks through sundry systems in the kingdoms; one portentous mining disaster is invariably followed by others; and wars are pregnant with wars, as pestilences breed similar calamities. So it is in private life, where one surprise is pretty sure to succeed to another—though the surprises may be of opposite colours and characters, alternating like the streaks of fat and lean in a prime flitch of bacon. Moray had welcomed the news of his nephew's good fortune with double pleasure, that they seemed to upset all his ominous forebodings. The signs

of the preceding night had been significant; but, through disorder of the digestion or some similar cause, he had been persuaded to read them all wrong. They had heralded a sufficiently exciting event by way of seasoning to a Highland shooting luncheon; but personally it could not affect him in any way, unless indirectly and pleasantly through the future of his daughter. Matrimonially, Master Jack's prospects were looking up, and consequently Leslie's were proportionately depressed. Accordingly he glanced across to Leslie, to see what the poet was thinking of the situation. Though he knew well enough his elder nephew's generosity of disposition, he was prepared to see him grave and pre-occupied, but the reality went far beyond his anticipations. Leslie's brow was knitted in gloomy thought, as his eye was riveted on the newspaper he held in his hand. "He takes it more deeply to heart than I had fancied," Moray thought to himself, "and very likely is vexing himself quite unnecessarily. I greatly doubt whether Grace has ever cared for Jack; and most assuredly, were she a pauper, she is not the girl to be influenced by his sudden acquisi-

tion of wealth. If she really liked him, it would be a different thing, for now he might justifiably make regular proposals. *Nous verrons.*"

However, in his delicacy and consideration, he thought it better to suggest a move. "Time's up, gentlemen," he exclaimed, setting the example and getting up himself; "you must tear yourselves away from your heather couches and tobacco."

General Battersby and Calverley Baker were his own companions. Leslie, who did not carry a gun, was in the habit of attaching himself indifferently to either party. On this occasion he elected to go with his uncle, following at his heels like his shadow, though like a ghost he had nothing to say, and seemed to wait to be spoken to. His silence struck Moray all the more, that it appeared almost incumbent on him to say something as to Venables's piece of good fortune. In the growing sense of embarrassment, Moray went off his shooting. And when, after missing two or three fair chances in succession, he muffed a singularly easy right and left, Donald Ross could not refrain from a guttural ejaculation. "Did any mortal ever see the like of that!"

If I had not filled Glenconan's cartridges myself, I would say that one of the gillies had forgotten to put in the lead!"

The laird, listening, caught a "sough" of the sound, and waxed wrathful; yet he had the justice to vent his wrath upon Leslie, and not on the innocent keeper.

"Confound you, Ralph! I believe you are casting the evil eye on my gun-barrels. The powder in the morning was straight enough; and now if an ostrich were to get on the wing, I believe I should shoot below him. If you *would* only say something and break the spell."

As he spoke, Ralph was almost at his elbow, and he answered the invocation with impressive solemnity. "I have been waiting to speak to you, sir,—" and then he hesitated. "Heaven knows I would gladly forbear, even now, were it possible."

Moray shrugged his shoulders involuntarily, as he thought to himself, "How terribly in earnest he takes it, poor fellow! and here I am let in for a bad quarter of an hour, and probably the rest of the day's shooting will be spoilt."

Then immediately, kind-heartedness got the

better of selfishness, and he answered in a tone that was sympathetic and soothing—

"I might scold you, my good fellow, for hesitating with me. I might surely say, if you will only remember the past, that you are bound to give me confidence for confidence. More especially if what you are brooding over in any way concerns me. But since you have said so much, you must continue. You know nothing pleases me so much as straightforwardness. And," he added, smilingly, "I don't mind if I give you a lead. Am I right in thinking that Grace has something to do with it?"

"Quite right, sir, and I am grieved to say it; but I fear not at all in the way you imagine."

At the notion of being trifled with over any trouble threatening Grace, her father's bristles got up at once; and it was as the quick-tempered fiery Celt that he turned sharply on his nephew—

"If I love frankness, I detest riddles, Master Ralph. If you have anything unpleasant to tell, will you have the goodness to tell it quickly?"

"Bad news is always bad to break," said Ralph, slowly. "But neither of us are men to knock under to misfortune. Yet when you know all, you will admit that I might well shrink from the task. Nay, don't get impatient. The Southern Counties Bank is in extreme difficulties; already it is more than probable that it has closed its doors."

"Good heavens! you don't say so. How many shares has your mother got in it?—twenty or thereabouts, is it not?"

"Twenty. Yes."

"With unlimited liability. What a terrible misfortune! I never could have foreseen anything like this, though you know that as one of her trustees I was strongly in favour of selling; and if old George Leslie had not been another, sold most certainly the shares would have been. But he was supine and ailing, and slow to do anything, and I own I never looked for anything worse than fluctuations."

"You acted for the best, and need not reproach yourself, sir. But read that," and Leslie pulled the '*Scotsman*' out of his pocket, and handed it over to his uncle. "It seems there were ugly rumours afloat, but I have

hardly looked at the papers for the last day or two. Not that we could have done anything in time. My uncle George is at Kissingen, and in no condition to transact business."

Moray hardly listened. He was devouring the '*Scotsman's*' money article. The rumours of the previous day or two, following just on the collapse of one or two great firms of iron-masters and shipbuilders, some of whose partners were either on the Board of Direction or closely connected with it, had been quickly followed by a panic and a run. Other houses of equal importance were said to be compromised or involved. Should they come down in turn, as was hourly expected, the bank must fail to face its liabilities. It was insinuated that for four-and-twenty hours the shares had been artificially bolstered by money found by the Board. The bolstering, if it were a fact, had failed of its purpose; now in the reaction, the relapse in the shares had been tremendous; and when the writer penned the article they were practically unsaleable. In another corner of the paper, a paragraph announced, on good authority, that the other Scottish banks, after protracted deliberations,

had been unable to see their way to tiding the “Southern” through its difficulties.

“ Which, if it be true—and true it probably is—is necessarily the bank’s death-warrant,” sighed Leslie.

Moray nodded a gloomy assent. “ But after all,” he said, in another moment, “ matters might have been very much worse. Your mother will always have her jointure from Roodholm—£400, is it not? I don’t imagine the creditors can touch that; nor is she in any way bound to sacrifice it. She loses her Southern Counties shares—say, round numbers, £5000. The rest of her trust funds must be given up—say, again in round numbers, as much more. Well, to say nothing of being her brother and rich, as a negligent trustee, I am really responsible. When she has got a full discharge, I start her fair again ; I pay her over the £10,000, and never miss it. My dear boy, after all, we are making a mountain of a molehill ; consider that settled, and let me go back to my shooting, unless you mean to make Donald your enemy for life.”

But Leslie laid a hand gently on his shoulder. “ God knows, my dearest uncle, how

grieved I am; but I fear you fail to realise the situation. If the leading article in the ‘Scotsman’ be reliable, the liabilities of this most unlucky concern will be enormous.”

“Very probably, my dear fellow, and very sorry I am for the shareholders; but how need that affect your mother? She gives up her property: I make it good to her; and so far as she is concerned, the whole will pass like an ugly dream, and the worst she can suffer will be a few days’ anxiety.”

“Would to God that were the worst, sir! But you—you are a trustee.”

“Well, and what then?”

“Why, surely you must know, or you ought to have been informed, that in such a case as this the personal property of the trustees is held liable to the uttermost farthing. My uncle George has nothing, or next to nothing, and I dread to think what the calls may be.”

Moray let fall the butt of his gun as if he were grounding arms, and his jaw dropped at the same time. He passed his hot hand across his brow, from which the cold beads of perspiration were oozing already. But to do him

bare justice, he was only thinking of Grace—not of himself, or even of Glenconan.

Ralph had nothing to say at the moment—no comfort to give. But he felt pangs of shame and bitter self-reproach as he remembered that his uncle would willingly have got rid of these shares, and would have done so had it not been for his mother's fatal obstinacy—for Mrs Leslie liked good interest as well as most people. “Had I given my thoughts to practical business like Jack Venables—had I not gone dreaming away existence like a moonstruck idiot—nothing of this need ever have happened. I ought to have used my influence with my mother, and seen that her trustees were made safe.”

Almost unconsciously he moaned out the reflection aloud; and Moray heard it, and it awoke him from his stupor.

“Not a bit of it, Ralph; I say to you what you said to me a few moments ago, that you have no cause to reproach yourself. The business was mine, and mine alone, for we know that your uncle George was but a dummy. Any interference of yours would have been unwarrantable, and of course we should have

resented it. No, no ; happen what will, always remember you have nothing to blame yourself for."

"It is generous of you to say so, sir ; and to forget your own troubles in trying to relieve mine. But your generosity cannot alter the state of the case, nor affect any reparation it is in my power to make."

The first shock over, with its terrible suddenness, Moray was not a man to be prostrated. Though he might quiver like the oak to the first burst of the hurricane, he was not a man either to bend or break. Though wind and tide had for the most part been in his favour, he had nevertheless battled with the world as a mere lad, and had always quietly prided himself on indomitable courage and the prompt resolutions that were not to be shaken. Nor did his natural strength of mind or the habits of a lifetime fail him in this extremity. It was characteristic that as he walked mechanically onwards, while his mind was full of Grace and her fortunes, already he was vaguely devising means of parrying or retrieving the calamity that threatened them. "Could I only see her safe, could I only, were it pos-

sible, keep Glenconan for her, even at the cost of heavy mortgages, I would think little myself of going back to the East, and betaking myself to the enterprises I used to love so well. I am strong as ever I was, though a little stiffer." And he stretched the iron muscles of his arms, and expanded the breadth of his burly chest. "If Grace were but happily married, I might go with an easy mind, though it would be hard to turn my back on her again." And as he thought of Grace being married, he glanced naturally at Leslie, who was stalking by his side in sad abstraction. Leslie, he knew, would welcome such a match ; but he was not quite so sure of his favourite, Jack Venables.

Then came a distraction which did him good. As the laird, usually so keen, seemed to have cast all thought of the shooting behind him, Donald Ross became ireful, and then anxious. The dogs ranged unobserved, and "drew" through the heather unnoticed. Don had dropped to a steady point : Flora, the most graceful of Gordon setters, had backed him in an attitude of statuesque sublimity : the laird had walked past unheeding : the birds

had skimmed away unharmed. Donald's mind was made up that he must be in the presence of some strange misfortune, and to relieve his mind, he swore at Don; then stooped and patted him kindly on the head. Whereupon that sagacious animal looked as puzzled as the old keeper. Thenceforward Donald set himself to watch his master, as keenly as one of his terriers would have watched an otter's hole. From his place behind he could see little of Glenconan's face, but he studied his gestures, and the set of his shoulders. The signs were plain as print to him, and his worst suspicions were confirmed. The faithful old fellow would have given a year's wages to know the best or the worst of it at once. But his native refinement reminded him that attention, however well meant, could hardly fail to be offensive, so he fell back several paces further in the rear, by that manœuvre keeping the gillie behind him. Secure from observation, as he thought, his rugged features showed the intensity of his sympathy; and, like Leslie, he went walking in silent meditation, lifting his eyes occasionally from the ground to take another survey of his master.

On one of these occasions Moray chanced to turn round. He was taking a fond look down the strath that might soon be lost to him for ever, and the eyes of the master and the follower met. Donald's weather-beaten face coloured up like a girl's, and he felt painfully guilty. As to Moray, he understood it all; and the sympathy of his faithful old servant sent a warm glow to his heart. He had friends still—here was one of the stanchest of them—with health and strength. Surely he was not so much to be pitied after all: surely he might make a manful fight for his daughter. He made Donald a sign, who came to his side in a moment. In gratitude, and something like actual love, he could have almost embraced the old keeper in foreign fashion: he would certainly have pressed his honest hand, had it not been for the watchful eyes of the gillie.

“It’s like that you may have had some ill news, Glenconan; it would take a deal to make you give over the shooting in the very best of the day.”

“You’re right, Donald; I have had bad news, and in due time you shall know all

about it. But it's nothing, as I hope, that may not be got over ; and in the meantime, remember, not a word to Miss Grace."

" 'Deed, Glenconan, and you may trust me there. I would rather be crushed to death under the stones, like poor Angus, than bring one cloud across the sunshine of her bonnie face."

" I am quite sure of it ; and now I must try to shoot a bit, or Hector, behind there, will be having queer fancies. It may be the last time," he added, involuntarily ; and Donald groaned aloud as he heard the sad ejaculation.

" The Lord preserve me, Glenconan ! don't say it's as bad as that ;" and he threw so much of heartfelt melancholy into his droning pronunciation of the "bad," that, in other circumstances, it would have made his master smile. Now he merely shook his head in sad assent to what sounded like the dying wail of a funeral dirge on the bagpipes over the departing glories of the house of Moray.

" Bad as it may be, we must make the best of it, Donald ; and happen what may, I shall never forget your kindness."

He felt strangely softened in his present

mood. He had always been a good and a liberal master, but now he thought he had never done half enough for dependants who had been born and brought up under the shadow of his ancient roof-tree. How he mourned internally over the wasted opportunities that might be gone from him never more to return.

These thoughts at least found no response in Donald's breast. He remembered, as indeed he might, the bright high-spirited boy he had taught to shoot and throw a fly ; who had never forgotten him, even when exiled among outlandish savages ; who had sent him home, by way of appropriate *souvenirs*, the heads and skins of the strange and outlandish beasts which garnished the walls of his little cottage, and were the wonder of the neighbours for forty miles round. A proud man Donald had been when keepers and gillies made pilgrimages to see them, gaping in astonishment as they heard him descant on the wonderful exploits of this modern Nimrod. A far prouder man he had been, when the Nimrod would beat up his quarters, when he came back to Glenconan from the East on his

periodical visits. Donald had adored the man who had been his ideal of a gentleman and a hero ; though latterly he had set up a rival idol in the person of the laird's beautiful daughter. After all, though, the two were a duality of deity, distinct, no doubt, yet indivisible in his affections. They had always seemed to be removed far beyond the reach of any earthly calamities save age and death, which must come to everybody. Had any gay trifler played false with Miss Grace—had it been “the Duke” himself, or a son of the minister—Donald, though a pious man, and a regular church-goer, inasmuch as a mountain-walk of nine miles might permit, would have shot him with as little remorse as a hooded crow. Now, in so far as he knew, this unknown evil had been wrought by no enemy in particular. Notwithstanding, and without any spur of personal animosity, he was just as ready to lay down his life for his master or Miss Grace. And as the greater included the less, he longed to place his little property at their disposal ; for Donald, who had a fair knowledge of life, never doubted that money was at the bottom of the mischief. I said

that the greater included the less ; yet possibly his money was more to him than his life. A hardy hillman, when his foot was on his native crags, he would have thought nothing of risking a slip into a bottomless abyss, or a shot from the gun of some daring night-poacher. That was always in the way of his business. But he was a prudent Scot as he was a daring mountaineer, and few men could more heartily appreciate the possession of riches superior to his station. Come what might,—age, illness, or crippled limbs,—he might live on his hardly saved means, nor be burden even to Glenconan. The thought had cheered his heart through many a toilsome walk, and many a lonely night-watch. So when he eagerly offered to give up all to the laird, casting the care even of an aged mother upon Providence, I need hardly say more for his self-sacrifice and devotion. And there was no mistaking that he made the offer as if he ardently desired it should be accepted. With a prompt decision worthy of his master, he assumed an air of insinuating diplomacy, sidling up to his ear and his elbow, so that even Mr Leslie should not hear a word.

“Would you be willing now to do me a great kindness, Glenconan? and you must allow, sir, it is not often that I have asked one.”

“You may be very sure I will, Donald, if it be in my power,” answered his master, though more than suspecting what was coming, for the moment was indifferently chosen for asking ordinary favours.

“Well, Glenconan, it is just this. You and your father before you have done everything for me and mine; and if I have the snug bit shealing down the glen, and the bit money in the bank at Dingwall, it all comes of the kindness of the family. And if it was money you were needing—or Miss Grace either,—here he sank his voice to a barely audible whisper, —“you will take what I have, whatever—will you not, now?” And to Donald the sum in the Dingwall bank seemed no inconsiderable fortune.

The laird almost laughed, though he was much more inclined to weep. He was as much of a gentleman as Donald, and nothing would have induced him to refuse outright. At the same time he promised and vowed to

himself, that if ever the sunbeams should shine again on his side of the brae, Donald and the old mother should bask in their warmth. Now, neither the presence of the gillie nor the apprehension of his secret getting wind, prevented him from grasping Donald's horny palm in his own.

“We can talk about all that later, Donald, if you please. I must wait for the present till I see my way a bit. But be sure that there is not one of all my friends to whom I would apply for assistance sooner; meanwhile, and for the last time, not a word of all this to my daughter.”

Donald nodded intelligence; and withdrew in a state of intense glorification, which for the moment made him almost forgetful of his master's troubles. Glenconan had squeezed his hand, and turned towards him in adversity. Glenconan had as good as promised to take his money if he needed it. Glenconan, in short, had treated him more than ever as a friend; and Donald would have liked, as the assassin in the Border ballad, to be “hackit in pieces sma'” by way of showing his gratitude.

1

*Glad*

And the laird shot on for two or three hours like a man, though perhaps with something less than his usual skill as a marksman. If he had said little, he thought the more. But he did say to Leslie before they returned to the house—"It was not for nothing I had my forebodings of coming calamities last night, and I could almost believe they were sent me as a merciful warning."

## CHAPTER XX.

## MORAY GOES THROUGH THE MILL.

To Leslie, who alone was the sharer in his secrets, Moray's behaviour that evening at the dinner-table, and in the dining-room afterwards, was nothing less than heroic. There was no bravado. He might have been somewhat paler than was his wont; in place of turning to the decanters for a fillip, he drank far less than usual. But he did the honours with the ease of a hospitable Highlander; and the shrewdest of his several sharp-sighted guests never suspected anything of his inward anguish. The long-protracted dinner was all the more trying that the unconscious Jack Venables, in the flush of his last piece of good fortune, was in the highest possible spirits, and made no attempt to suppress them. Why should he? They were all friends, and, as

usual, nobody seemed to grudge him his luck. If any one appeared indifferent to it or jealous of it, it was Leslie ; and for him Mr Venables could make allowances. If Leslie's gloomy silence affected him in any way, it was chiefly because it reminded him of his deep obligation. "Against any one else," he thought, "I should make the running at once, and strike home with Grace and her father, while the iron is hot. But that placid kind of poetical fellow takes things so terribly to heart ; and come what may of my own matrimonial prospects, in common gratitude I must not make him miserable for life. I must feel my own way before I do anything further ; and after all, should Grace have the bad taste to prefer him, I must comfort myself as I may, and seek consolation elsewhere. She is an extremely bewitching girl, no doubt ; but there are as good fish in the sea as ever came out of it ;" and so thinking, he looked critically towards Julia Winstanley, who, catching his eyes, averted her own. Jack remembered, too, that his cousin was an heiress ; but at that moment his confidence in his own luck was so great that he was in even a less mer-

cenary mood than usual, and he never much cared for money for its own sake. And so, under the influence of the Château Lafitte, he came to the comfortable conclusion that he might demonstrate his gratitude to Leslie with no extraordinary sacrifice : that he would be guided by circumstances without suffering himself to be crushed by them.

But if Jack was inclined to resent Ralph Leslie's apathy, he had no reason to complain of his uncle's want of interest. Moray braced himself to remember how he would have felt had the impending calamity not been announced to him. Then he would have made his nephew's stroke of success his own, and set himself to celebrate the occasion by promoting an unusual gaiety. While Jack, with a modesty more or less unaffected, parried the compliments his uncle paid him on his sagacity, by carrying the war into the enemy's country. Having given Winstanley due credit for his advice once for all, he almost ridiculed Mr Moray for paying him any compliments.

" You seem inclined to put me in the place of Mr Pecksniff, who would have ascribed all the merit to the virtues of his system of edu-

cation had his daughter picked up a purse in the street. This plum has dropped into my mouth because I happened to be sitting under the tree, and I chanced to be sitting there with my mouth wide open. With you now, as you very well know, it was altogether a different thing. You followed up a first success with stroke upon stroke, all of them being directly due to your courage, foresight, and determination. I don't mean to blow your trumpet at your own table ; but if I appear to flatter you in speaking the simple truth, you ought to remember the provocation you have given me. Ralph, there, should consecrate a poem to your commercial exploits—perhaps, indeed, he is contemplating one, for he seems to be wrapt in silent meditation. Or, better still, you might give us an autobiography yourself, in the style of Daniel Defoe ; if you were frankly circumstantial, its success should be assured. It might have a run with the rising generation like Robinson Crusoe, and ought assuredly to throw Smiles on ‘Self-help’ into the shade.”

“Upon my word and honour I agree with you, Venables,” chimed in Winstanley. “I

never thought of our good host turning author ; but now that you suggest it, I don't see why he should not. I daresay he may be as strong in literary talent as on other points—at all events, he might take Mr Leslie into a literary partnership ; and what with Glenconan's practical romance, and Mr Leslie's poetry, we should have such a volume as the world has seldom seen. What do *you* say to it, Miss Moray ? ”

Miss Moray laughed and entered into the spirit of the joke, if joke it was. But apparently she thought the suggestion worth serious attention, for she believed her father to be equal to anything, and longed that justice should be done to a noble life, which had had so little of the contamination of everyday trade about it.

Never in his life, perhaps—not even on that fatal afternoon—had Moray suffered so much as from those ill-timed compliments and his daughter's playfulness. He sat there tied to the stake, nor could he escape from it, while his favourite nephew held firebrands to his epidermis, and his daughter with loving eyes and smiling lips blew the brands into a smoul-

dering glow, and made his sufferings wellnigh intolerable. Those successes of his, to what did they all amount now, but the remorse and disappointments of a wasted life? To what had he devoted the strength and the powers of a lifetime, but to preparing for himself this crowning bitterness? His saddest presentiments had never foreshadowed anything so bad; and judging by the sharp measure meted out to him, his reproaching conscience had treated him only too leniently. Well, as he paid such a penalty, surely his faults would be purged; and at any rate there was some measure of consolation in that, were it not that the sins of the father were being visited upon the child, and that the unconscious innocent one opposite to him was to suffer with the guilty.

But the longest of all evenings must have an end; and even with sea-sickness in an Australian liner, or toothache in the trans-Continental express, we are reminded that time is not eternity. When the ladies had retired to bed and the gentlemen to the smoking-room, Moray excused himself—truly enough—on the score of some business, and

made a sign to Ralph Leslie, which was acknowledged. Five minutes afterwards they were together in Moray's den.

"My things are packed, and perhaps you will kindly order the dog-cart to take me on to meet the train to-morrow morning," said Leslie.

"I supposed as much," returned his uncle, "and you are right to follow that telegram of yours to your mother immediately. She will need your presence and advice. Fortunately my sister is a woman of sense and spirit ; and she keeps that small jointure, I suppose, under any circumstances ? "

"I do not know how that may be," returned Leslie. "In the first place, the creditors may have a lien even upon a secured income ; in the next place, if I know my mother at all, if she thinks sufferers have any moral claim on her, she will never stand upon legal technicalities."

"As to her legal rights, I can say nothing. But were she to make any sacrifice such as you suggest, it would be nothing less than Quixotic. That, at least, is my deliberate opinion ; and you know, Ralph, whether I

am likely to think lightly of conscientious scruples."

"Assuredly not ; and, no doubt, your opinion would have great weight with my mother. However, till I have an interview with her lawyer, it is premature to discuss the point. I hope sincerely, for her sake, she may have a right to her jointure, and that she can stick to it without any searchings of heart. Otherwise, it will be a black look-out for her, and I don't know who there is to help her."

Moray stared at Ralph in astonishment, which he did not seek to conceal. And, of course, Ralph understood him, and answered the look in a rather injured tone.

"Why, sir, you surely cannot possibly suppose that I mean to continue master of my little property ? It is strictly entailed, as you are aware, but the rents are at my own disposal ; and if your fortune must be engulfed in this miserable wreck, you cannot imagine that I am to save anything ?"

"Indeed, my dear boy, I do think so ; and you are not only justified in holding to your income, but bound to do so. If things are as bad as we fear, you cannot save me ; for

the value of your life-rent of Roodholm, even could you give a valid title to it, which I doubt, would be a mere drop in the bucket. So much for legality or expediency. As for morality, I say that the surrender would be more Quixotic than the case of your mother parting with her jointure. I may be beggared for a technicality, and hard it seems ; but you tell me that the law is clear, so there is nothing for me but resignation. If you voluntarily handed over your skin to the flaying knives of the liquidators on a technicality, you would fly in the face of your family duties, and sin against all natural affection.”

Leslie was struck by the argument, but not altogether persuaded. He sat silent, turning the question slowly in his mind, as was his custom. So Moray, in his anxiety to drive the argument home and clench it, tried the effect of an appeal from which he would otherwise have shrunk.

“ You desire to ease your mind by involving yourself in our common misfortune ; you don’t want to float away on the raft of Roodholm, while Grace and I go down with Glenconan and all our personal property. I under-

stand the feeling, and it does you honour. But it seems to me that if any one has a claim on you it is we, rather than the creditors of this most unlucky bank. You know I do not speak for myself; and my speaking at all commits me personally never to accept a single shilling from you. But I confess I should not be sorry to know that Grace as well as your mother had a friend, on whose purse and sympathy I could see her fall back in case of necessity, without any great sense of humiliation. There is not another man living to whom I would say as much; and remember that, after all, you are our nearest kinsman."

"If I could only play the Boaz to my cousin's Ruth," thought Ralph; but he was too generous to give expression to the thought in the circumstances. Though he would not commit himself on the spur of the moment, he was willing enough to be convinced by such considerations, and he intimated as much to his uncle, considerably to that gentleman's comfort. The next morning he started for the south, charged to make all possible inquiries at the fountain-head, and to sift the matter as far as possible to the bottom.

"Don't telegraph, whatever you do," said Moray, "unless in case of extreme necessity. Grace must know nothing of this, till we are assured of the extent of the calamity, and disclosure becomes inevitable. But write fully, and above all, frankly; my best hope now of an easy mind is to know the worst, that I may lose as little time as possible in setting about making the best of it."

## CHAPTER XXI.

## A COUSINLY CONVERSATION.

LESLIE found a pretext for his sudden departure, but somehow nobody seemed to give much credit to it. There was a sense of mystery in the air, and the serenity of the social atmosphere was troubled. Moray strove to do his best to make himself agreeable, but it was not in human nature to support the strain with the equanimity he had assumed in the excitement of its first coming. His bursts of gaiety were forced and unnatural ; they were followed by relapses into silent abstraction. His friends behaved according to their several idiosyncrasies. Winstanley, with his accustomed sagacity, scented trouble in the air, and thought that, for his own comfort as well as out of consideration for his host, it might be advisable to shorten his visit. The excuse

was all ready. Julia ought to be going south —her mother wanted her; and as he knew of no suitable escort, he had best take her in charge himself. If he felt inclined, he could always alter his plans *en route*, and consign her to her destination from Edinburgh or Glasgow. Calverley Baker felt less clear as to his arrangements. He was attracted, if not entangled, both by Miss Moray and Miss Winstanley; he liked his present quarters, and was loath to leave them, though he too had a shrewd idea that his room might be more desirable than his company. As for that rattling Celt, the M'Claverty, he was innocently unconscious of any cause for troubling himself. He ate, drank, shot, and amused himself, and trod on his host's corns at every turn. With Jack Venables, as we need hardly say, it was very different. He watched, he meditated, and felt sorely aggrieved that he had not been thought worthy of the confidence which had been unquestionably extended to Leslie. For though he said very little when Winstanley spoke to him on the subject, that there was a secret of some sort he never doubted. Yet he was too loyal to

the friendly connection, and to what he was pleased to think his love, to aid a stranger in discovering what his uncle desired to conceal.

For all that Mr Moray cared comparatively little, as his daughter caused him infinitely greater anxiety. Since they had been so much together, she had been in the habit of reading his face ; and he very soon discovered, to his sorrow, that there was no possibility of deceiving her. He was too honest or too weak to act his part successfully, and with her his vaunted stoicism was a transparent sham. After trying repeatedly to win him over to tell her all she was eager to know, — after affectionately making opportunities which he would resolutely ignore, although it was evident to her that he was longing to avail himself of them, — she finally lost patience in her desperation, and put the question to him direct.

“There is something very serious troubling you, papa ; and as it must affect me as well, I have a right to know it. Oh, it is no use denying it, even if you dared ! and though you may keep a secret from me, which I should scarcely have believed, you could never

say what is untrue. And had it concerned yourself alone, though that is impossible, you would never have cared about it half so much. You have often said that we understood each other thoroughly, yet it seems that you can never have understood me at all, otherwise I should call you unkind, and even cruel. The only thing a girl is good for is comforting her father when he needs comfort. And you forget that when you are silent, I am imagining the worst, and very likely giving myself unnecessary anxiety."

Her father involuntarily groaned. Seeing that nothing short of ruin was before them, his daughter's worst fancies could hardly play her false.

Grace answered the groan with a sorrowful look which was more eloquent than any appeal in words. With his pale face and his quivering lips, Moray seemed like a criminal under the pressure in the torture-chamber. So that, in a spasm of remorse at her playing the tormentor, she tried to speak more playfully, and only changed the form of torture.

"I should not have been so vexed had my cousin Ralph been your only confidant; but

it is clear to me that Donald Ross is in the conspiracy of silence as well, and I cannot say I feel flattered by the preference. Oh, you must not blame poor Donald," she went on hurriedly, for her father had moved his lips with something that suggested an execration. " If he did tell me the story of the widow, he would not breathe a syllable in a case like this; but I am sure the old man was never more miserable in his life, and I only put two and two together."

Then Moray heaved a sigh that threw a weight off his chest, and made up his mind in a moment. He expected the letter from Leslie that very forenoon, so that, after all, the disclosure would only be anticipated by an hour or two. If his worst fears were realised, no harm would be done; if, on the contrary, things proved better than he expected, the shock of the great calamity would be lightened. He had taken her in his strong arms, and clasped her with a tender pressure, so that she could feel the palpitations of his heart. He had just begun with, " You know well I never doubted you, dearest; that if I have hurt your feelings by my silence, it was

all meant for the best,"—when a knock at the door interrupted him. Grace had come to seek him in his den, to which in these days he withdrew only too frequently.

"Who is it?" he asked impatiently, pushing his daughter away from his embrace.

"A boy with a pony has brought the post-bag on from the post-office, sir. One of the letters was marked for special and immediate delivery." And the man's tone of sympathetic interest irritated his master. It seemed to show that the trouble he had sought to conceal was common talk in the household. He was on the point of telling the servant to take the letter-bag away, since there could be no possible hurry about the contents. But looking at his daughter, who seemed to have been struck into a statue of suspense, he changed his mind, and sacrificed his *amour propre*. "Well, you may give it me then, since you say one of the letters is marked urgent; but remember another time, when you know me to be engaged, that any urgent letters will keep."

So the man went away, more convinced than ever that his master had grave reasons

for anxiety; and the moment the door had closed behind him, Grace in turn had thrown her arms round her father. She saw that his anxiety was great as her own, so she administered a kiss by way of cordial. Though he was grievously ashamed of his agitation, his fingers fumbled as he opened the lock of the bag, and drew out a handful of letters and papers. Letters for himself, for Winstanley, for Baker, &c.; and naturally the last he came to was that addressed in Leslie's hand.

"Confound those square envelopes that are gummed all round and all over!" His trembling fingers could hardly force their way in. But if he had hoped against hope, hope was extinguished at the first glance. "I am grieved, my dear uncle," Leslie began—and then he knew that all was over. He laid the letter down, and before reading further, he briefly broke their condition and their prospects to his daughter. Of course he need have had no anxiety as to the immediate effect on her. So far as that went, he ought to have known her better. Grace, who had been brought up from the cradle in luxury, was ignorant as a baby of the sordid side of life. It was im-

possible that she should shrink on the spur of the moment from the pecuniary sorrows that were quite unfamiliar. More especially when in a state of high nervous exaltation, all her thoughts and sympathies were concentrated upon her father. What occurred to her was, that here was a chance of rising to her ideal mission as a ministering angel. She had longed for some occasion of proving her great love, and now and at last she had the opportunity. Moreover, she believed so entirely in her father's courage and resources, that she was as slow as himself to admit that misfortunes could shake him to his fall. Not that she by any means blinked the real state of the case; but she was ready to welcome any sacrifices that might be imposed. To her high spirit, overstrung by her filial devotion, that seemed but a new form of pleasurable excitement. Had she foreseen the separation it might involve, her feelings must have been very different.

“It is sad, to be sure, that you should lose the fruits of all your labours,” she said; “but after all, we shall only part with the superfluities, which were always as much of a trouble

as a pleasure. I never cared for that life in town; and as for you, had it not been for your labours in East London, I am very certain it would have been nothing but positive wretchedness to you."

"Perhaps so," answered Moray, with a sigh; "yet I begin to regret it, now that it has slipped from me. It is no light thing to lose the power and pleasure of doing good; and then—Glenconan. How I wish it had been entailed! and I have rejoiced so much in freeing it from its burdens, and in the prospect of leaving the old place to you and your husband."

"I don't know about the power of doing good, but as to the pleasure, it can only be more keen when we do good on a narrow income. Remember the blessing on the widow who bestowed her two mites was greater than on the rich who gave out of their superfluities. And as for Glenconan—my husband, should ever I have one, must manage to make himself happy without it. At all events, now, if I am married, it will be for myself, and not for my money. So that you see, papa, on second thoughts even this calamity is not without its compensations."

"I know a man who would make you happy, whether he married you with your money or without it," thought Moray. And thinking so, his thoughts very naturally reverted to the momentous communication lying on the table. It did not tell them much that was new: it merely confirmed his worst anticipations. "With regard to the prospects of the liquidation," Leslie wrote, "which is the all-important question, I regret to say that the gloomiest reports are generally circulated and believed. The largest shareholders are deeply indebted to the bank, by the fraudulent complicity of their friends on the direction, and I fear they are hopelessly insolvent. It is the story of the 'City of Glasgow' over again, and some of the directors have borrowed enormous sums which they can be in no position to repay. The rest of the shares, with not many exceptions, are held by persons of very moderate means, or by small tradesmen who have sunk their savings in them. In the circumstances, it would be both cowardly and foolish to shrink from looking our misfortune in the face, and I know the firmness of your resolution too

well," &c., &c. Then he passed from business to what may be called sentiment, and reiterated the expressions of his heartfelt grief that his mother should have been the cause of beggaring his uncle. "I know not how you are to break this to poor Grace," he went on. "To a girl brought up as she has been——"

But there Grace interrupted the reading. "A girl brought up as she has been, indeed ! Yet why should I complain of my cousin misunderstanding me, when my father could think I should be troubled for myself." Then changing her tone, she sighed out "Poor Ralph !" Putting herself in his place, she remembered how bitterly, with his unselfishness, he must feel his position. For her father had told her of Ralph's proposition, and of the practical arguments which had induced him to reconsider it. Perhaps, looking at these from another point of view, she attached less importance to them than he had done. But she did him the justice to feel that he would suffer the more severely, if he were persuaded to remain even in the nominal enjoyment of his estate when she

and her father had been ruined. She knew enough of the world to be aware that evil tongues would talk ill of him, and that well-meaning people would misconstrue his motives. She knew how that sensitive nature of his would smart under such misconstruction. And although she had characteristic-ally undervalued the loss of their lands and their money, she already began to realise some other of the sorrows in store for them.

Moray was the first to break a silence that had lasted for some minutes. "Well, Grace, my darling, now we are assured of the worst, there is no time to be lost in providing for it. I don't mean as to matters of business," he added, with a sad smile; "they will keep for a time, since nothing we may do can mend them. And Ralph has full powers to act for me, and he will keep us informed of all that goes on. But it would be hypocrisy, and worse, to try to play the happy and wealthy hosts for an hour after we positively know that we are paupers. I hate a scene, but fortunately no one has gone out shooting to-day; and when [the party assembles at lunch, I shall tell them all about

it. Of course till that is over, you will keep your room. Nay, I ask it as a personal favour, for I will not lay my commands on you. Alone, I can go through with it well enough : I should be ashamed to break down over a mere loss of money. But with you at my elbow, I could not answer for myself ; and you would not willingly be the cause of my weakness—or the witness of it."

Grace had nothing to answer to that argument ; but again she felt the sharp prick of the thorns. She was like the passenger who is ordered below under battened-down hatches, and denied the excitement of open-air dangers on deck, when the ship may at any moment be sent to the bottom.

"Of course, papa, I shall do as you desire ; and perhaps it may be the best. But there is still an hour to lunch, so I shall slip out at the side door, and wander up the wood-paths in the glen. The fresh air will do me good, and I may make the most of our beauties while we have them."

Her eyes filled with tears, and so, to tell the truth, did her father's. Next to the daughter who was so dear to him, he grieved over his

beautiful Glenconan. But it was no time to give way to emotion, and he pulled himself sharply together, as he had often done before.

" You say it is an hour to lunch, dear, and there is one thing I ought to do : I must try to get hold of Jack beforehand. He is a good boy, and my nephew, and he would think it unkind if he heard nothing of our trouble till I announced it to strangers."

With that he folded his daughter in a fond embrace ; and never, even on the occasions when he had left for the East, were the two so loath to tear themselves asunder. From the window he followed her with his eyes as she stole swiftly towards the glen, like the lapwing that strives to elude observation as she seeks the cover of the rushes near her nest. But as Grace felt escape more assured, her pace began to slacken ; and she moved with an air of melancholy listlessness that sat strangely on her light and active figure.

" Heaven send," sighed her father, " that the clouds may lift and pass ; but meanwhile, and in a single hour, the whole brightness of her bright life has been transformed, and I

hardly dare think how she may come out of the darkness."

Grace was slowly climbing the winding path which led to a favourite seat of hers hanging over a murmuring waterfall. How often she had sat there in pleasant day-dreams, listening to the cheery splash of the water, that seemed to chime in with her own bright anticipations ! The very foam-bubbles in the stream below, that sparkled in the sunshine as they danced and broke, might have been the emblems of the light and careless life, so free from all sorrows and anxieties. The reflection of the rainbow colours on the little clouds of spray had typified the varieties of a radiance that only took different forms. Now the merry memories of that happy past only made the present and the future weigh more heavily on her. The gay girl of the night before was a grave and thoughtful woman : she felt as if she might have slept for years, and wakened with a weakened body, in a woful world of sad experiences. It was all very well keeping her spirits up when it was her duty and privilege to console her father. It was all very well to pretend in his presence that the news he had

broken need change nothing to her. She resembled him very closely in many ways, but naturally she was more emotional, nor had she his disciplined self-control. So that the reaction came with her more quickly than it had come to him, and already she was conscious of a sad depression of spirit—of an intense craving for the sympathy of somebody with whom she could talk things over more freely than she dare talk with her father. “Oh that Ralph were only here!” was the natural thought that occurred to her, as she remembered the instinctive delicacy with which he had played the part of the consoler, when the widow of the unfortunate keeper had been the object of their common charity. Then, forgetting Ralph and her own sorrows for a moment, she reproached herself bitterly for the lightness of heart in which she had gone about that errand of mercy. No doubt she had been what she might have called “very nice”; she had said very suitable things in a sympathetic tone; she had spent her money—or rather her father’s money—liberally. But all the time, in practising her charity as a luxury, as a philanthropical distraction,

how very little had she really felt! And possibly she might never have the opportunity again of bestowing anything more than empty words of comfort. But how different had it been with Ralph!—she was sure of that. He had really felt where she had tried to feel; so if he were only at her elbow now, what an inexpressible relief it would be. But as he was far away, and as she found herself in a double solitude, she would do the next most comfortable thing in the circumstances—reach the haven of that lonely seat of hers, and indulge in the luxury of a good cry. She would have plenty of time before bathing her eyes and going back, since she had promised her father not to appear at lunch.

Mr Jack Venables, who had made no such promise, chanced then to be descending the hillside in excellent spirits and appetite. What he was thinking of at that particular moment I cannot pretend to say—perhaps, as was very much his habit, of nothing in especial. But it is certain that since his latest stroke of good luck, in spite of some vague anxieties about his uncle, he had moved about in an extreme sense of exhilaration. He had

developed a novel taste for music, and had taken to whistling an accompaniment to his footsteps of reels and strathspeys, which, though for the most part they were wofully out of tune, appeared notwithstanding to please him excessively. Now, as coming by a short cut down the hill, bounding lightly from heather tussock to heather tussock, he was blundering with shortened breath at the second bar of “Tullochgorum,” when he reached a point which commanded a view of the bench on which his cousin was seated. Whereupon he stopped short, and stood at gaze, partly to make sure that she was Grace and not Julia, for he seldom saw his cousin alone of a morning. Sure enough it was Grace, but he was greatly struck by her attitude. For in place of sitting upright, she was stooped nearly double, and, unless his eyes deceived him, was weeping bitterly. Jack was very warm-hearted, and somewhat curious as well. His cousin was in trouble ; it would be a melancholy pleasure to comfort her ; and then, no doubt, she had the clue to the secret that had been exercising him. It would be well if we analysed our mixed

motives more often, though instantaneous photographs of mental introspection might yield very ugly results. He resumed his descent somewhat more leisurely, for his mind was more full of speculation than ever, and after what he had seen, he had no fear of his cousin making a move immediately. He had suspended the whistling, which might have given her warning of his approach, but, being an honourable young fellow, he had no intention of taking her by surprise. Having made a slight circuit so as to cut off her retreat to the house, he struck up his "Tullochgorum" again, and more shrilly than ever, making a considerable rustling among the pine-boughs moreover, as he climbed the hill-path in turn.

His attitude of amazement when he stumbled upon his cousin did credit to his histrionic powers; and the way in which he rattled on about his morning's walk, and the observations he had been making on Highland natural history, in the manner of the intelligent hero of "Eyes and No Eyes" in our old friend '*Evenings at Home*,' said much for his delicacy of feeling. But Grace, whose suspicions were perhaps excited by her sorrows,

and who knew that she had vainly dropped a veil over her swollen and streaming eyes, was impatient both of the pretence and the interruption. So long as all went well, Jack was the most agreeable of companions ; but it was not towards him she would have turned in adversity. She showed her impatience and annoyance by a movement that was more significant than flattering. Jack was hurt and humiliated, but, strange to say, in no way offended. Or if he was annoyed, it was only with himself. It all came of his confounded finessing, although he had finessed with the best intentions : he had been artificial, if not false, where he ought to have been cousinly and natural. And warm-hearted as he was, when he saw his cousin overwhelmed with grief, he felt nothing but an unselfish eagerness to help her. As he spoke out frankly and manfully, yet in tones of deep tenderness, visibly broken by real emotion, every trace of resentment vanished from her heart and her face, and she frankly threw up her veil. It was the sign that she meant to have no more secrets with him ; for had she not her father's permission to tell him all ?

And indeed, as she told the pitiful story, her heart warmed to him as it had never warmed before. The young man was quite overcome, and could conceal his sorrow as little as his astonishment. To him the loss of worldly substance appeared far more serious than it had seemed to her at first sight. He was not one to undervalue the evils of poverty or the loss of social position and consideration. He could put himself quickly in his uncle's place, and realise all the bitterness of seeing the fruits of a successful career swept away when it might be too late to recover them. And at once, by intuitive sympathy of temperament, he conceived Moray's mind and read his purpose. He foresaw, what had never yet occurred to Grace, that their ruin meant a new separation. Grace would see her father go into exile a second time, just when, having been pauperised or beggared, she most needed affectionate support. Though, to be sure, she need neither be beggared nor impoverished. And then he melted to her in a great sympathy, which was free for the time from any touch of selfishness. It was with a trembling voice and a strange diffidence of manner that

he reminded her how she and her father could never want friends, and stanch friends. In the earnestness of his feelings, he spoke almost as Leslie might have spoken.

"Remember that, through a long and honourable life, your father has not a single action to reproach himself with. Remember that, when he was rich and happy, he never neglected one opportunity of doing good. Look at me, for example, whom he has loaded with kindnesses, and with whom he offered to share his fortune; and be sure that in this passing adversity he will reap the fruits of what he has sown. Why, there are men, and good men, whom he has bound to him by obligations, who will think it the best day of their lives when he consents to accept some return. Trust me, dearest Grace," he went on,—and his sanguine nature did then good service, for there was no mistaking that he believed what he said,—"trust me, that we shall pull through somehow or other, and that things will come out very differently from what you anticipate."

It was Jack's candour as much as anything else that gave Grace, at all events, some

momentary hope. He was too honest, being thoroughly in earnest, to try to befool her with commonplace remarks to the effect that matters might be less desperate than she fancied. It was possible, but he did not believe it; and he would not prepare disappointments for her. She was quick enough to perceive as much, and to be grateful, and it gave her an agreeable sense of confidence in his predictions and consolations. Then the way in which he had spoken of her father was very sweet to her; and she was grateful again that, in the circumstances, he paid no compliments to herself. She had always much liked him, as we know; but now she felt a great revulsion of kindness in his favour. Blinded by his superficial brilliancy, and deceived by his gaiety of manner, hitherto she had never done him justice; and she remembered reproachfully how but a few minutes before she had regarded his arrival as an intrusion and a nuisance. It was never in her nature not to repay kindness with kindness—not to make reparation as she could—when conscience reproached her. Besides, Jack had been unmanned by excess of sympathy—she could

see the tears still sparkling in his eyes, poor fellow! It was surely no time for reserve, when she had so much to say that would be pleasant for him to hear. He had laid hold of her hands, and pressed them in his ardour, and she squeezed his in return.

"Oh, Jack, you make me so happy, and so miserable, and so much ashamed of myself. I always liked you and admired you, and knew you must get on and make your way. But I never knew how good and how noble you were. There is some good already coming out of all this evil, for the scales are falling away from my blinded eyes. But you must confess," she added, as she smiled through her tears, "that you should bear some of the blame. Why will you always talk lightly of all things, and never give expression to the real nobleness of your heart? But now we have had our explanation, and I hope it may be a lesson to both of us."

Jack liked such lessons very much. And it was characteristic of him that, in those transports of his, and in this mood of exaltation, he accepted all she said to him very much as his due. Self-examination subsequently would

have told a very different tale. In the meantime he felt, with agreeable resignation to misrepresentations, that hitherto he had been a much misunderstood, not to say a maligned, character ; and that his unquestionable worldliness had been a mask, which should nevertheless have been transparent. But it was the fate of virtue to meet with injustice, while in this instance justice had been done, although tardily ; and on the whole all was well that ended well. Then rising to the height of the situation, and without the slightest hypocrisy, he set himself, in the most delicate manner possible, to give his cousin assurance of substantial assistance. His only desire was to speak so that she might be induced to accept his offers and the sacrifices he was ready, nay eager, to make.

All this time the minutes had been flying swiftly by, and the rest of the house party at Glenconan must have been safely seated at the luncheon-table. But had any of them bent their steps towards Miss Moray's sylvan bower, he or she must have read the last chapter of a romance in a scene that was merely cousinly if not purely platonic. Jack,

still holding both his cousin's hands in his, from leaning against one of the rustic posts had gradually settled down upon one knee. But he rose as Grace breathed her confession of penitence, and for the first time she made room for him on the seat behind her. To keep his hold of both her hands in the circumstances would have been awkward, if not impossible. So releasing one, by way of recompense he softly stole an arm round her waist. It was done in all cousinly honour, and whether she was conscious of it or not, she made no objections. It was no time to stand upon trifles, with her heart going out in gratitude to her kinsman. And Jack, to do him justice, was by no means consciously lover-like. He fancied he felt to her something like a father. He longed to attain to the privilege of a disinterested benefactor. He pled and he pressed his claims with all his native energy and eloquence.

"You cannot refuse, Grace, neither can your father. It would be cruel in you: it would be churlish in him. We have been brought up like brother and sister,"—there he rather drew the long-bow, since he had

only seen her once or so before their meeting at Glenconan in the previous summer; but the emergency admitted of poetical licence, and neither, as I said, was standing on trifles. "We have been brought up like brother and sister," said Jack, with great fervour; "and as for your father, he has been a father to me. Do you know that he placed his purse at my disposal, and offered to launch me in the East at his own expense, when that legacy of mine made acceptance unnecessary? Do you know that when I went in for my first fortunate speculation—it was at Oban, on the way south, after my shipwreck—and when Mr Winstanley objected to the insufficiency of my means, I told him with entire confidence that I could count upon Glenconan's assistance? I should have asked anything of him, only Winstanley stepped in. So you see that really I am largely his debtor, and now I have the first claim among many others to ask him to let me lighten my load of gratitude."

It was well and delicately urged, as Grace felt; and she was not unwilling herself to welcome relief from that quarter. His gentle manner soothed her deliciously: she remem-

bered how steadily successful he had been, and leant naturally towards the support that was offered them. So she did not refuse absolutely, as he had feared: as she would have refused almost with scorn and indignation had he spoken more abruptly. She rather temporised, and murmured the objection that from him, or from a man of her father's age, offers of the kind came very differently.

"My father was an elderly man, and thought himself wealthy. As you said, he might have stood to you also in the place of a parent; and it was your duty to accept from him what we dare not accept from you."

"Nonsense, Grace! There speaks your pride, and a false pride, as you know very well." As he saw her listening, hesitating, and half yielding, he resolved to carry her resistance with a rush. "Nonsense! you know that age has nothing to do with it. I am old enough to be my own master, and to know my own mind—and yours. To put it upon higher grounds, have you any right to refuse me the luxury of doing a duty that is comparatively unselfish! I have never had such a chance

before: I may never have such a chance again. I must have your help, of course—the whole tenor of my future life may be trembling upon a single word from you. Refuse—only you have not the heart to refuse—and if I become a callous and self-seeking money-grubber, I only hope you may never reproach yourself. If you knew my temptations that way, you would surely come to the rescue. Accept, and only promise you will do your best to prevail on your father—and do you really suppose I shall be the poorer or the worse? Even if I be a trifle the less rich for a time, I shall never have made a better speculation, and you cannot have the conscience to refuse me from false pride."

Again Jack and his cousin Ralph seemed to have changed *rôles*; and as he put himself in the place of the cousin that she reverenced, she was more and more moved in his favour. He was quite right, as she admitted. What had chilled the liking that might have once changed to love, was the suspicion that at bottom he was selfish and worldly. If there had been anything of truth in that, he had generous impulses, which only needed to be

fostered into vigorous life. His fate, as it seemed, might be in his hands, and terrible might be the responsibility if she refused to help him. It would be hard enough in any case to deal with her father, with his rugged pride, with his haughty independence,—but at any rate, was she not bound to try? If she failed, she would have done her best; she would have pleased her cousin by making common cause with him, and she would have delivered her conscience. While, if she succeeded—and she knew something of her influence—her father's fall would be broken to him, and he would be easy in his declining years. It was not in her nature to give her confidence by halves, or to accept such kindness as this without doing her utmost to show her sense of it. Metaphorically she threw herself into Jack's arms, and heart and soul she accepted his alliance. And to do that honest-hearted but impulsive young gentleman bare justice, never in his life had he felt more grateful or gratified. Not when he had heard of the legacy that gave him wings to fly; not when Winstanley, reaching out a hand, had lifted him on to a firm standing-point; not

when the private secretaryship to my Lord Wrekin had offered him an admirable opening in politics; not when, only a day or two before, the telegram about the American mine had given him the partnership in a possible El Dorado. Again, it would be ungracious to analyse the motives which he assuredly did not pause to examine himself. He may have felt something of the pride of unfamiliar power, in the prospect of saving such a man as Glenconan, whom he had regarded as the ideal of a successful adventurer. He may have had some *arrière-pensée* of the hold he was laying upon Grace, who seemed leaning to him more and more, in her love and her fast-growing gratitude. Certain it is, that he behaved with rare delicacy and circumspection. Grace had said, with delightful warmth and brevity, and with a look that meant much more than the words—

“Say no more, dear Jack; you have more than persuaded me, and I can only promise to do my best. Should my father accept these favours at your hand, you will have good reason to be proud, though it may seem ungracious to say so. You may be sure, at all

events, that neither he nor I will ever forget what you have offered us to-day."

And as the colour had come back to her cheeks with reviving excitement and hopes ; as her tears had dried themselves in the breeze, and her eyes seemed the brighter and the fresher for them ; as the listlessness of her attitude had given place to her usual lithe and graceful vigour, with the earnest passion of the emotion that had left its traces on her face,—Jack had never before known the richness of her beauty. It was destined to be a day of revelations. To his delight she intimated her acquiescence in his offers. He came back to something like his own familiar self. The sacredness of her sorrow had chilled him into reverence. With her promise to permit him to relieve it, and her reviving spirits, his passion began to awaken with his perception of the beautiful, and he admired the woman with a passionate admiration. At that moment he would have stripped himself of all he had, willing to begin the world again, could he only have made sure of securing her as his wife ; and yet but a few moments before he had been thinking neither of love nor marriage.

But Jack was a gentleman, and his generous intentions still made his cousin very sacred to him, and not for an instant would he have abused his opportunities. It had occurred to him to ask her to be his wife on the spot: but he dismissed the thought before he had entertained it. He would as soon have made love to a woman whose will had been paralysed by mesmerism, like a Lorenza under the spells of a Joseph Balsamo. On the contrary, with one last lingering pressure, which he could not resist, he gently withdrew his arm from around her waist. He sealed their bargain with a cousinly kiss on the cheek, which he did not prolong indiscreetly, and then, to all appearance, becoming once more the self-possessed man of business, he began to discuss ways and means, and to prepare his cousin for what she had to say to her father. He had not tried to blink the magnitude of this misfortune in the beginning of their interview, and now it proved that honesty was the best policy. He put the case to her with a precision that might have appeared cruel in other circumstances.

“ Of course, till you told me, I never suspected how deeply we were concerned in this miserable failure. All the same, I was interested in it as a public calamity, and have been reading everything about it very carefully. If we are to trust the best information, there is no denying that the smash may swallow even a fortune such as your father’s. It would be no kindness to prepare disappointments for you by persuading you of anything else. And, like the friendly swimmer who told his drowning comrade in the water that he would not lay a finger upon him till he was helpless, I must not come forward ostensibly till the final arrangements have been made. Meanwhile—and I was never so thankful for it before—I have more money than I know what to do with. I am always so actively employed, that I have never the time to spend or to squander; and I have had marvellous luck, as you know, with every one of my investments.”

“ You may say now ‘a marvellous blessing,’ I think,” suggested Grace, softly.

“ A marvellous blessing, then, if you choose to sanctify my money by drawing on it; and

from henceforth, dear Grace, remember I have your promise to persuade your father to treat me as his son." He did not venture to add, "and as your brother," though he had to check the sweet words that were trembling on his lips.

## CHAPTER XXII.

## AN EXCITING LUNCHEON.

GLENCONAN'S guests had enjoyed many a lively meal under his hospitable roof, or in his picturesque glens. But never had they had such an exciting repast as at the luncheon on that memorable "Black Monday." Though the great news was their *pièce de résistance*, it really came in as dessert. Once again he had summoned his pride to his aid, and done the honours with something like his former joviality. Only a close observer might have remarked that his appetite failed him, and that he trifled with the knife and fork that were wont to do signal execution. He was eager to precipitate the inevitable disclosure; he was longing to know how those friends of his would take it. Their reception of the announcement would be a pretty fair test of what he might

expect from the world. But he had made up his mind to wait till they had trifled with the cheese and the biscuits; and with eyes turning perpetually towards the clock, he suffered and waited accordingly. Then, as it chanced, Mr Winstanley gave him an opening.

“Everything must stagnate, of course, towards the end of August; but really, on my word and honour, those papers become intolerably dull. Shooting is all very well for you young men, but I have become somewhat dependent on public sensations. And all the subjects are either threadbare or trivial, or at all events they do not recommend themselves to my selfishness. I know all about the national defences, and the wisdom of imperial federation, and the due protection of our coaling-stations. I confess that my sympathies are purely platonic for the shop-girls who are forbidden to use the chairs provided by their employers for customers. And I am personally indifferent as to openings in life for ‘our boys,’ seeing that happily I have no boys to provide for. I must say, Moray, that in your favourite *rôle* of Monte Christo, you are bound to supply us with a new sensation.”

"And I have got it for you, Winstanley," said Moray, so gravely that that sensitive gentleman felt he had put his foot in it. Remembering the mystery that had been floating in the air, he knew at once that he had pulled the string of a shower-bath, and might look out for a chilling douche. He had rather the string had been pulled by any hand but his own; but it was too late to laugh it off, and he simply sat still and listened.

Then Moray told his story, frankly and with manly brevity. He made no moan over his misfortune; he did not condescend to apologise for his carelessness: what was present to his mind was the duty incumbent upon him of showing, that he expected and would accept of nothing from his auditors.

"I should not have troubled you," he said, "with those personal annoyances of mine, but they may become public property within the next day or two; and I felt that as you are living under my roof, you have the guests' claim on my confidence. I think I should have been wanting in the duties of hospitality had I left you to learn anything of

this from others, or possibly from the public prints."

In his jealous fear of their misconstruing his motives, he was careful to say nothing of the claims of friendship; and yet, while his manner was stern and almost repelling, he was longing for some frank outburst of sympathy.

Had he thrown a bomb-shell by way of a dish for dessert into the middle of the little party, he could scarcely have surprised them more, or, I may add, scattered them from Glenconan more effectually. Not that they were worse than the rest of the world, or that the world is so bad as it is popularly supposed to be. But our ordinary acquaintances, on the shortest possible notice, cannot be expected to undertake the bearing of their neighbours' burdens, more especially when the burdens mean unlimited liability. The first impulse is to put themselves out of reach of danger; the second, perhaps, to see what can be done.

Calverley Baker was getting on towards becoming a millionaire by inheriting a lucrative business and looking sharply after number one. It was not to be expected that in the first shock of a deception, though it might

have been an involuntary deception, he was to fly in the face of all his principles, and commit himself. Moreover, he had been considerably smitten by Miss Moray, and could not precisely remember how far he might have pushed his advances. The douche that Winstanley had thrown down on the luncheon-party had effectually chilled any fervour in his affection ; and while he murmured something sympathetic, he had made up his mind that he must be summoned to the south by some telegram on the morrow. Once at Cardiff, as he told his conscience, regaining his freedom of will, he could do anything that was friendly and judicious. As for the M'Claverty, the chieftain was an honest fellow enough, and sorrowed for the calamity more than might have been expected. He had taken kindly to Glenconan, who was a capital companion on the moors ; and in his inborn pride of birth and race, he would have regretted the extirpation of an ancient Highland family. He was sorry for Glenconan, and very sorry for himself, for he too had had vague aspirations of marrying the heiress. And he spoke out the more heartily and unreservedly that

nobody could reasonably expect anything of him. He enjoyed but a liferent of entailed acres ; and if he were not actually poor as Job, it would have been the height of absurdity had he held out a lean purse to the tottering Croesus.

Winstanley's feelings were much more complicated. I must have been very unsuccessful in my sketch of that gentleman if I have not shown him as at once good-natured and inveterately selfish. Far more than Mr Baker would he have been willing to help Moray. But even more than the wealthy Welsh iron-master, thanks to his familiarity with boards of direction, was he paralysed by the horrors of unlimited calls. Prompt offers of help seemed out of the question, yet his situation had become extremely awkward. It is true that he did not care for dissipation, or even gaieties ; but he by no means assented to the dictum of the Preacher, that it is better to be in the house of mourning than in the house of mirth. What had suggested itself to him before occurred to him again, that there is such a thing as overstaying your welcome. And so by a wide circuit he travelled to the same conclu-

sion as Baker, that he would do the best for himself as for his unfortunate friend by withdrawing his foot from his friend's house as soon as possible. But Winstanley was nothing if not considerate, and the ugly coincidence of a telegram next day was an idea that could not possibly have occurred to him. He determined to cover his deliberate retreat with a kindness that should leave nothing to desire, and which, indeed, he felt rather than feigned. And like Baker, only with more sincerity of purpose, he resolved that he would reach Moray a helping hand. As the oldest man in the company, as the crony and almost the confidant of their host, it clearly devolved upon him to reply. And to do him justice, he weighed and chose his words as much out of consideration for Moray's feelings as for his own.

“God knows, Glenconan, how grieved I am. Had such a misfortune fallen on my brother, as it might well have come upon any man, I could hardly have been more sorry. It would be paying you a poor compliment to try to make light of it, and I know your character far too well to underrate its strength. At the same time, let me remind you, as an old man

of the world, that our tendency under such shocks necessarily is to go to extremes. Bad as things may be, you may take it for granted that they are not nearly so black as they appear to be now. You see all the circumstances from a desponding point of view : you forecast none of the many chances that must mitigate them. I may venture to add, perhaps, that you forget the friends who can never forget their many obligations to you."

It must be confessed that the words of this speech of sympathy, though somewhat cold, were not ill-chosen. In the last sentence, which had been added by way of rider, the speaker had gone further than he originally intended. But in watching Moray's impassive face, he had warmed up, so as to try to strike one responsive spark from it ; and after all, he had committed himself to nothing he was not willing to perform. He would gladly show himself a friend in due season, and even submit to some moderate sacrifices in the sacred cause of friendship.

Moray's answer was equally cool and extremely civil. When trouble softens before it hardens us, we are apt to hope against hope

for fervent and active sympathy. But after all, Winstanley had said as much as might have been expected : with his ordinary penetration preternaturally sharpened, he had followed the conflicting workings of the other man's mind, and if he gave him little gratitude, he bore him no malice. He bowed and smiled a little bitterly ; and then, quietly rising to open the door, he threw it back for his guests to pass out. Miss Winstanley, as the lady, ought, of course, to have gone first. But though, unlike her friend Grace, she was by no means much devoted to dogs, she had stooped to pat the black retriever that lay stretched on the hearth-rug, and was playing with the fringes of her silken ears ; while the gentlemen, who saw that their host was impatient, did not stand on the order of their going, but evacuated the dining-room promptly.

Glenconan *was* impatient : he thought Miss Julia's flirtation with Finette very ill-timed. He had never liked the young lady much ; he had deemed her both artificial and worldly, and had it not been for his confidence in Grace, would have wished his daughter a

better companion. Consequently, being supremely indifferent to Miss Winstanley's opinion or feelings, he had hardly deigned her a look while telling his story. If he had looked, he would have seen that the girl was profoundly impressed. Worldly as she really was, she was all the less inclined to make light of the catastrophe. Appreciating profoundly, like Jack Venables, all Moray was losing, she could admire the manliness with which he had borne himself; and putting herself in his daughter's position, she felt sincerely for Grace. Perhaps she may have welcomed a rare chance of indulging in the pleasure of genuine emotion; and she was desirous, besides, of making atonement for some shortcomings in her father's speech. At all events, when she raised her head there were real tears in her eyes, and Moray was both touched and taken aback. For once the strong and ready man had not a single word to say; and the girl who was generally so glib seemed to be equally embarrassed. But it is the woman in such circumstances who first finds her tongue; and once she had broken the ice, Miss Winstanley felt no further difficulty. She spoke

with a feeling to which Moray had believed her a stranger. Though her voice trembled she was voluble enough ; and by frankly owning to her faults, she took him on his weak side. After somehow expressing her sorrow and her surprise, she went on—

“ But can you guess what selfishly troubles me the most in all this ? It is, that Grace should never have thought me worthy of her confidence—unless, indeed, you had forbidden her to speak. It would have been so natural to seek comfort from the only woman under your roof, and one who had been living for weeks in her companionship. Don’t think that I blame her, sir,” she added quickly, seeing that he was about to interrupt and to defend his daughter. “ It is myself I reproach, and I reproach myself bitterly. She thought I had no heart and no feelings, and, very likely, she was so far right ; yet I surely have a heart somewhere, though I have often doubted.”

“ You need doubt it as little as I do,” said Moray, kindly, laying his hand on her shoulder ; “ and I ought to be a judge in those matters,” he added, with a smile. “ The

truth is, I knew as little of my misfortunes as you."

"Thank you, sir," said Julia, and she seized both his hands in hers. "You don't know how happy you make me; and if you would only think of me for one moment as Grace, you might give me courage to speak freely."

"Speak freely, then, by all means, my dear. I am sure anything you say can only please me."

"Well, sir, all I wish to say is this, that you must not shake us off—me and my father. Had he been alone with you—had those other men not been in the room—I know he would have spoken very differently. He is rich; he knows the world well. I am sure I am blundering, but you have promised not to be offended. What I mean is, that I am certain he intends you to count upon him, as I hope Grace will forget the past, and learn to lean upon me as a sister. You will try to persuade her, won't you, sir?"

Moray's constancy had been proof to the cold reception of his news, but it was shaken by this genuine and unexpected outburst. He was very grateful to Miss Winstanley for

convincing him that cynicism was to be made difficult, or impossible.

“Never mind now about your father, or what he or anybody else may do for us—we shall have time enough to think about all that. But when either you or I tell Grace what has passed between us, I am sure she will agree with me that our losses may prove to be gains. You have made me cheerful, if not happy, my dear, if that is any comfort to you; and now, if you mean to please me, you must dry your eyes and let me go.”

“And you will not misunderstand my father,” she added, pleadingly, laying a finger on his arm. “If I might tell you all, I can read him so clearly.”

“And so can I, believe me,” rejoined Moray, with a smile. Then stretching his conscience slightly, he went on—“I should have spoken precisely as he spoke in similar circumstances. Neither of us is quite so young as you, and we have long lost the freshness of your feelings—worse luck. But all the same, I envy and understand them.” And then he did what that morning he would

never have dreamed of doing, and pressed a fatherly kiss on her forehead.

I may almost say that Julia Winstanley felt a transformed girl, as he left her standing on the rug over the impassable Finette, who, like a true cynical philosopher, had assisted at the interview, without even one approving wag of the tail. That rush of warm natural feeling might have changed the currents of her life. She had indulged in the luxury of affectionate sympathy, and was rewarded by knowing that it was a luxury indeed. And it was remarkable that the indulgence of unselfishness led on to ideas of self-sacrifice, though it may be true that they did not cost her very much. She had never been really in love with Jack Venables; she had never acknowledged to herself that she had more than a liking for him. But considering that he had been the adopted son of the house—that circumstances had brought him into perpetual contact with her,—it was naturally somewhat irritating to her vanity that he had persisted in being constant to Grace. She had seen that any of his flirtations with herself had been platonic, and she had rather resented it. She had

never known exactly what to make of him. Being young and ardent, he was naturally ambitious ; and though he might regard money as merely making stepping-stones for his advance, he seemed to be as keenly set upon money-getting as her father. That he should have stuck to his attachment to his cousin, who was likewise the heiress to her father's wealth, was only consistent. But how might he behave now that Grace was suddenly beggared ? She had a sinister suspicion that he might turn towards herself, in which case she would have scorned and summarily rejected him. She would never have consented to be married for her money, by a man who had been proof to her charms while he could do better. And in any case, not having too high an opinion of the masculine nature, she thought that Jack might make a satisfactory enough husband, if once fairly wedded to a wife who had many fascinations. Now he was relatively rich, and had brilliant prospects before him. So Miss Winstanley loyally resolved that it should not be her fault if he were not retained in his allegiance to his cousin. Then the proud Mr Moray might

accept from a son-in-law and a daughter the assistance he would reject from anybody else. Having come to that comfortable conclusion, she remembered it was time that she left the dining-room.

## CHAPTER XXIII.

## JACK DRIFTS TOWARDS MATRIMONY.

IT was an odd instance of the irony of circumstances that Jack Venables and Miss Julia Winstanley, having reached an identical conclusion by very different roads, should fall literally into each other's arms as their thoughts had converged. Jack, coming back to the house, had made a rush for the dining-room to ring for the cold meat and the bread and cheese, since before facing his uncle he felt that he needed fortifying. Opening the door, he found himself face to face with the young lady, who already had her hand on the handle.

“Miss Winstanley!” he ejaculated, with some astonishment; and she set his surprise down to a guilty conscience.

“Yes, Mr Venables,” she answered, gravely,

"we have just been hearing very sad news from your uncle."

Now Jack, contrary to her surmises, was rather pleased to happen upon her than otherwise. He was full of all he meant to say to Mr Moray: in his rapid walk to the house he had been thinking of little but his cousin; and in the consciousness that Miss Winstanley might possibly have misunderstood him lately, he was anxious to burn his boats and put everything on the most straightforward footing. He would feel his way as to offering himself for Grace, but in any case he must be free of any *arrière-pensée*. Nevertheless, and until the way was felt, he had no idea of taking anybody unnecessarily into his confidence. So he said nothing, and waited for her to speak on. Then, still under the influence of her recent emotion, she spoke on very strongly. Jack, at that moment all glowing with health as he was after his exercise, seemed to shrink up and shrivel in her eyes. She imagined him embarrassed as to transferring his "love," and she meditated upon whited sepulchres and the miserable weaknesses of masculine humanity like a feminine Thomas à Kempis. So

far as she was concerned, there should be no further misunderstanding; yet she felt constrained to temporise for Grace's sake.

"We have been hearing very sad news, and I need not say how grieved we have been for Grace and your uncle. How I wish I were in your place!"

"In my place, Miss Winstanley! what can you mean?"

"My meaning is plain enough. If I were in your place, I should have the claim of relationship. If I were in your place, I should go to Mr Moray and force upon him, in the rights of relationship, what he would spurn were it offered as a kindness. And if I were in your place," she went on, looking straight into his eyes, "I think I should take advantage of your double relationship with your cousin, and plead for her accepting the protection which she doubly needs in her isolation."

Jack stared in amazement. Miss Winstanley with her passionate eloquence was a new revelation to him, and perhaps not altogether a pleasant one. To have one exceedingly pretty girl, to whom he had necessarily and as mere matter of civility paid certain slight

attentions, urging him frankly and with no semblance of disguise to go and offer marriage to another beauty, was altogether a new and startling experience. However, as his aspirations coincided with her orders, there was nothing more to be said. No doubt, honesty was the best policy ; and as she showed herself so absolutely indifferent, she should have no reason to complain of any want of frankness.

" I should never have dreamed of troubling you in this matter, Miss Winstanley ; though I am sure we shall always be the best of friends. I had no notion you took so deep an interest in my future. But as you *have* condescended to interest yourself, and as my uncle has confided his own affairs to you, all I have to say is, that it rests with Grace and with her father how far they may permit me to sink or swim with them. My dearest ambition is to make her my wife ; though I need hardly say, that I tell you that in strict confidence."

The frank expression of feeling took Miss Winstanley likewise by surprise : we dare not say whether the surprise was entirely agreeable. Assuredly she liked Jack none the

worse for the trace of pique which gave point to his candour. At any rate, with perfect composure, and in the good-fellowship that had always existed between them, she took his hand as she had taken Mr Moray's.

“I cannot tell you what pleasure you have given me, for you may help them if anybody can. And though it may seem presumption to say so, perhaps I may be of some use in promoting your wishes. Grace is not much given to confidences ; but surely a girl will talk in those circumstances, if she feels pretty certain of sympathy. And I think, after the conversation I have had with Glenconan, that she may feel more affectionately towards me than she has ever felt before.”

Whereupon Miss Winstanley did leave the dining-room at last ; and Mr Venables, violently ringing the bell, sat down to a cold sirloin with a capital appetite. The next tack in his course so far was all plain sailing : he felt committed to a step he had only contemplated ; and when he placed himself unreservedly at his uncle's disposition, it should be with the intimation that his dearest desire was to obtain the hand of his cousin. It was

decidedly his custom to be preoccupied by a single idea at a time ; and Leslie's rivalry, with his own gratitude, were dismissed as entirely as if he had never gone hunting the wild goats at Lochrosque, or as if the man who had saved him lay buried at Tom-na-hourich.

Moray had been brought into more charity with his fellow-creatures by the passionate outburst of the worldly Miss Winstanley. After that, it seemed blasphemy to doubt of the love and care of an omnipotent Providence, which might manifest itself unexpectedly in the least likely quarters. But all the more, he looked forward to the meeting with Jack, when Jack should have learned the misfortune that had lighted upon him. He had loved the lad for his spirited impulses ; he had marked his selfishness, or rather his self-absorption, but he had never doubted his sincerity ; and now his young friend would be brought to the test. From Jack, as from everybody else, Moray was determined to accept nothing but goodwill ; but still it would be a sad addition to his troubles should Jack prove as guardedly sympathetic as old Winstanley. He had withdrawn to the solitude.

of his den : he knew his nephew in common decency must come to him ; and in all the distraction of his roving thoughts, he sat listening for the boy's foot in the passage. The well-known footfall came in due course, and then there followed the rap at the door. The strong man was so overstrained, so painfully excited, that he scarcely dared to look up when he called out, "Come in." But in another instant his anxiety was relieved. His hand was silently grasped with a fervent pressure ; and Jack, drawing a chair towards his, sat down affectionately beside him. Come what might, he was delighted to know that the nephew he had loved the best was of metal as true as the other.

"So you have heard all about it, Jack? Eh?"

"I have heard it ; and by what I may call a happy accident, I have heard it all from my cousin. I chanced to meet her as I was hurrying home to lunch ; and will you think me very heartless if I say that the bad news have affected me less than I expected—hardly spoiled my appetite ?"

"I don't know why they should, I am sure," rejoined Mr Moray. In other circumstances

he might have been disappointed, but he still felt the warm pressure of his nephew's fingers, and he guessed already whither Jack was tending.

"And you will let me tell you why they should not—though, I think, you might meet me half-way, and spare me some little embarrassment."

"How do you think Grace takes it?" demanded Moray, somewhat irrelevantly.

"Just as I should have expected. She is a noble girl, and a very sensible girl besides. Of course, her chief trouble is for you; and I believe she has such faith in your generosity of sentiment, that she feels that matters might have been very much worse."

"On my generosity? You speak in parables, Master Jack. It seems to me that for ever and a day, perhaps the practice of generosity will be far beyond my reach."

"You don't think that, sir. You know that if you were next door to a pauper to-morrow, you would be liberal still with your coppers, because you cannot possibly be otherwise. But Grace, as I fancy, thinks with me, that the real proof of generosity with a man like

you is in consenting to lay yourself under something like obligations. Not, of course, that there would be obligations really," added Jack, blushing and stammering.

"So you two have been conspiring together," said Moray, his face lightening up; "and as it would appear that I am to be the victim of your machinations, I confess I am curious to hear what your objects are."

"Oh, for that matter, I am only anxious to return good for evil; and I have no wish to keep any of my secrets from you. You know that no young fellow in this world has ever had more luck than I, since the day the letter came to me here with the announcement of my legacy. Without being able to take the slightest credit to myself, I have tumbled out of one good thing into another. I made friends with Winstanley on that reef in the Atlantic; I have put my money and his credit out to something more than usury, since it is invested in all manner of speculations that are steadily looking up; through him I have formed a number of useful connections; and I have been pitchforked into that place of private secretary, where I hold winning cards if I only

play them decently, with lots of trumps, and possibly an honour or two. Then, by way of capping it all, came that telegram the other day, which told me we had really struck oil in that American mine. I have ready money in hand, to say nothing of splendid contingencies ; and when the opening comes, I am ready to cut into the game of politics with a sufficiency of fortune to back me."

"I know you have done exceedingly well for yourself, and no doubt you have had a most unusual run of good fortune. But such runs of fortune do not come to fools, and you are over-modest, Master Jack, in ignoring your own merits."

"Very well, my dear uncle, have it your own way ; all the more, that I wish you to think well of my prospects. I have a superstition against counting chickens before they are hatched, but nevertheless you must allow that I am doing well in the poultry line."

"I never denied it. Quite the reverse."

"And now," said Jack, talking very quick, "do you remember whence all my prosperity dates ? From the day you called me into this room here as a penniless young scapegrace,

and put your purse and your whole interest at my disposal. Even then I knew you were a man who would perform more than you promised ; and I felt that if you sent me out to the East my future was secured, should I only keep steady."

" You didn't go. And even if you had gone, I offered you nothing more than introductions."

" I said that you promised less than you would have performed. The long and the short of it is, without any beating about the bush, you treated me that day like a father, and spoke far more considerately than most fathers would have done. And if I did not go, I told you the reason ; and when I ventured to show you all that was in my heart, and even suggested my being much more your son than you had intended, you did not resent my impudence by turning me ignominiously out of doors. Nay, you only repeated your generous offer ; and if that does not give me a claim upon you now, I don't know what should. Of course, you know why I have been blowing my own trumpet. If I remind you how well I stand in a worldly point of

view, it is to show you that there is enough and to spare for us all ; so that we may share without scruple anything I have to offer. I am asking a great thing ; but then, surely, I have strong claims on you."

Moray's pale face beamed with pleasure.

"At any rate, my dear boy, you have done me a world of good. If I have learned nothing else, I have learned this forenoon how easily the sting may be taken out of money troubles. There is that girl, Julia Winstanley, behaving like a trump : she has been heaping coals of fire upon my head ; for, to my shame be it said, I never greatly took to her. As for you, you have warmed my heart ; but, to be sure, for you it has always beat very kindly."

"Then we understand each other," exclaimed Jack, with delight ; and, to do him justice, he had never been so grateful before, for the prosperity which put it in his power to be his uncle's benefactor. After all, with an average share of faults, there was certainly a deal of good in Mr Venables.

"Softly, my boy, softly," said Moray ; "there can be no possible misunderstanding

between us for the future—you may be sure of that. But as for accepting what you offer so generously, that is another thing. To begin with, I fear I am dipped so deep, that I should only be dragging you into the abyss along with me."

"I don't know how that may be," rejoined Jack, changing all at once into the cool man of business. "But, in any case, I have been talking things over with Grace, who seems to have the family talents for business. I never contemplated this new partnership of ours commencing till the wretched bank business has been sifted to the bottom, and you have a discharge in full from all your liabilities. Strange it seems," added Jack, musingly, "that such a misfortune should fall on a man like you; and that a fortune, honourably made and nobly spent, should be swept away by an accident so cruelly iniquitous."

"It is a hard case; but as for being iniquitous—would it surprise you to hear that if I have not been actually expecting something of the kind, at any rate my conscience protests against my daring to say it is un-

deserved? Do you remember watching me as we sat in the carriage on your first visit to Glenconan? You saw something in the expression of my face that puzzled you—did you not?"

"Well, now that you speak of it," said Jack, rather taken aback. To tell the truth, he had forgotten all about it, nor, for the moment, had he the faintest idea what his uncle might be driving at.

"I think I should like to tell you what it was that troubled me then. You won't take it amiss if I say that the warning may be useful; for we are much of the same turn of mind, which is the reason, no doubt, why I have always been drawn to you."

Then Moray told the story of his mental anxieties, pretty much as he had told it once before to Leslie. Only now he had the opportunity of pointing it with the moral, that this misfortune might be meant as merited retribution. But Mr Venables, as may well be supposed, listened in a very different spirit from Leslie. As a warning, he did not take the narrative at all amiss, nor had he the slightest intention of laying it to heart. He

thought he might look back upon life with an easy mind, if he had nothing worse to reproach himself with than Moray. Had not his uncle said that these regrets had been haunting him for long, he would have thought his mind must have been shaken by recent trouble. What struck him most forcibly was the evidence of weakness in a man he had always regarded as so strong: it was strange that his hero should actually have been reproaching himself with those daring and successful combinations for which he had most admired him. And, on the spur of the moment, he spoke of such sensibilities with something that sounded very like contempt; though, on the other hand, he was so eloquent in his admiration, that Moray was far from being offended. He spoke as ninety-nine men in a hundred might have spoken, and Moray thought rather sadly that the comfort had come too late. "I may have been a fool to worry myself with fanciful regrets; but in that case it will be the harder to see Glenconan go from me." Then expressing the conclusion of his thoughts aloud, he said, "And if sin there were, it seems

hard, in any case, that the sin should be visited on my innocent child."

"Oh, so far as that goes," broke in Jack, who welcomed the opening he had been watching for—"so far as that goes, I make bold to say that you may make your mind perfectly easy. There are two things that lie near to your heart. You wish Grace to be independent ; you would be glad to save Glenconan for her. If a girl is too rich, you know as well as I that she may be married to misery for her money and not for herself. There are heartless scoundrels stalking about looking out for heiresses whose substance they mean to devour ; and though it is difficult to imagine a ruffian who could behave badly to Grace, there is no fathoming the depths of human depravity. Now, you see, as we have settled things," he went on, confidentially, "Grace will be no heiress—not to speak of—but she will, nevertheless, be very comfortably off ; and we can easily keep the estate in the family, though it may come cheaper to raise a mortgage on it in the meantime."

"An odd idea you have of a girl's independence!" was the thought in Moray's mind ;

but he dared not speak it out. For Jack, who was so ready with his replies to all objections, had assuredly an answer cut and dry to that one. As he would not speak, Jack did.

“ You won’t help me, sir, so I must help myself. As I said a little while ago, it is no use beating about the bush, so here goes. Give me leave to speak to my cousin—to beg and entreat her to become my wife. Her answer, whether favourable or the reverse, can make no difference in our understanding.”

“ No understanding,” interpolated Moray.

“ Her answer will make no difference in my resolutions, then, and I trust everything to time and your sense of justice. I cannot dare to hope she will say ‘yes.’ But if it should chance so, then, as your son-in-law, I shall take the liberty of arranging the settlements without any reference to you.”

Moray was more moved by Jack’s generosity than by his offhand eloquence. Honestly, should it please Grace, the marriage seemed an admirable idea. If he had the good luck to win the girl for his wife, his nephew gained more than he gave. But at the same time he remembered his obligations

to another stanch friend and faithful counsellor. Jack might win the prize if he could, but Leslie should have no wrong.

"Speak to your cousin, by all means. If she does say 'yes,' you shall have my cordial approval. And in saying so much, I am certain you will not suspect me of interested motives. If you and Grace arrange to pull comfortably together, I shall be off to the East again, and paddle my own canoe. Nay, never mind protesting in the meantime," he said, in answer to Jack's gesture of depreciation. "You shall not find me hard to deal with. But as I have recalled certain circumstances to your recollection already, I must tax your memory again. You remember, when you made something like a similar proposal once before, I told you that you and Ralph Leslie should both have fair play."

Jack's animated face blanched all over. For these two or three exciting hours he had forgotten the existence of Ralph Leslie, and now the reminder was disagreeable as might be. It chilled all his fervour; it threatened to dissipate all his dreams. If Grace were really attached to Leslie, she would certainly say

“no” instead of “yes.” Even if Grace felt doubtful, and Leslie were really in love with her—he suspected something of the earnestness of Leslie’s nature—could he, in common gratitude, in common honour, abuse his accidental advantages to make his benefactor miserable? Here was an ugly complication with a vengeance. Moray understood all that was passing in the young man’s mind, and again his affections inclined to his favourite. It seemed fated that Jack should always behave in a way that won his liking as well as his esteem.

“My dear boy, the decision rests with Grace, and the common wish of all of us is that she should choose for her own happiness. Leslie is in love with her—that you must have known. So are you. I should willingly welcome either of you for a son-in-law. I love Ralph as much as I respect him: yet I frankly tell you that if I were a marriageable young woman, I think I should prefer you for a husband. You may go and inquire, if you like, whether Grace agrees with me, and I assure you I shall be anxious to hear how you speed.”

## CHAPTER XXIV.

## JACK GETS HIS ANSWER.

Poor Jack was in a sad quandary. All his better feelings were in the ascendant, but unfortunately those better feelings fought against each other, and sophistry was enlisted on the more selfish side. Moray's penetration confirmed what he knew by his own inner consciousness—namely, that Leslie was in love with Grace. And if Leslie loved at all, Jack felt sure that he loved profoundly and passionately: it was a passion that would possibly colour all his life. As for himself, had it not been for Leslie, he would not have been there cogitating at that moment; and so far as any rivalry of his was concerned, Leslie might have walked over the course. But then, on the other hand, he had lived and he had prospered: that he was there, was a fact there

was no getting over. In this life we must take things as we find them, and make the best of the most untoward circumstances. He loved his cousin at least as much as Leslie loved her, though even in those transports of his the thought would still come, that he might console himself more easily than Leslie for a rejection. He loved his cousin as much as Leslie loved her, and it was with his cousin that the decision must rest. If she preferred him, as was possible, she would say so more or less frankly, and in that case it would be cruelty to cross her affections. Then, in a worldly point of view, he was undoubtedly the more eligible suitor. Leslie had but a small fixed income at best; and though poetry might bring him fame, it could scarcely lead on to lucre. While as Grace's husband, with his own elastic prospects, he must have a very great deal in his power. Moray might consent to take from a son-in-law what he would never accept from anybody else. If he would not bring himself to condescend to pecuniary assistance, he might consent to avail himself of political influence. By the interest of Lord Wrekin, or somebody else, Jack thought he

might get his uncle something good in the colonies. It would be no job. Moray knew the East thoroughly ; he had all the qualities of an able administrator : under any Government, whether Radical or Conservative, surely the thing might be managed. At all events, matters must be settled somehow, for, above all things, he detested suspense. Grace should either put him out of his misery, as he was pleased to phrase it, or assure him that she was willing to make him happy. He determined, if possible, to get the interview over at once ; but how to have a *tête-à-tête* was the question. After wandering alone about the woods through the morning—after not making her appearance as usual at lunch,—Grace would feel doubly bound to do the civil to Miss Winstanley in the afternoon. In any case, and on the off-chance of some arrangement, he would look into the drawing-room, though disinclined for conversation.

The stars in their courses fought in his favour, and Miss Winstanley conspired with the celestial bodies. She and her father, with Grace, were the only occupants of the drawing-room. Julia was as quick as Grace to remark Mr Ven-

ables's preoccupation, and she readily found an excuse for removing her father from the room. Then as Jack was pulling himself together for a plunge into his subject, to his astonishment Grace anticipated him.

"I am so glad to have you alone for an instant, Jack. Indeed I had thought of writing you a note, only I could not send it by a servant. Will you meet me an hour hence at the seat by the waterfall, and you won't mind waiting if I should be detained? Say 'yes' quickly, for there is somebody coming."

Jack looked yes, if he did not say it. The M'Claverty burst into the room like a modified Highland hurricane, only that the chief was brimming over with good-humour, and meant no mischief. He had shaken off his young hostess's troubles already, as a water-spaniel coming out of the water throws the showers of spray from his coat. Grace, with the hypocrisy instinctive to the best of women, had already taken a piece of worsted-work into her hands, and was lending a seemingly attentive ear to some meaningless remark of the intruder. Jack, who was in no mood to stand on ceremony, made a bolt of it, slamming the

door behind him. Quick-witted as he was, he needed time to think; yet he felt that his cousin's frankness boded no good to him. "She's not the kind of girl to throw herself into any man's arms; and if she were, mine would be paralysed: there is nothing I loathe like a willing woman. She has seen her father; she has heard what I said to him; and she is resolved that I shall labour under no misconceptions."

Jack had an hour to think, and he made the most of a good part of it. He was one of those men who momentarily crave for a thing when they once have set their heart upon it; who desire it doubly when there are difficulties in the way; and whose desire turns to a passion when their object threatens to elude them. Grace had never seemed to him more lovable. Her beauty had been heightened by grief and agitation; there was a far-away, wistful look in her eyes which profoundly touched all that was impressionable in him; moreover, he was quite able to appreciate her higher and more estimable qualities. I need not repeat that he set a due value on money, and he would have shrunk from love in a cottage, unless it were

"a cottage of gentility." He knew himself well enough to be sure that he was never made to live in hugger-mugger fashion and cater for a hungry brood. In such circumstances he must have fretted in company of the best woman in the world, and love would most likely fly out of the window. But on the other hand, any amount of fortune without love would have been far too dearly purchased ; and the luxury of mating prudently with a penniless bride was one he felt to be well within his reach. In his softened mood he thought how, with a husband's opportunities, he might endear himself to the girl who inclined to him already. If he could only win her to a word of assent from the heart, their marriage might be the entrance to an earthly paradise. He thought, too, how Grace in her gentle dignity would do the honours of a handsome and hospitable home. How proud he would be of the bright girl-matron, whose portrait should smile from the panel above the dining-room chimneypiece. Who should paint her ? Should it be Leighton or Millais, or some rising artist of genius, who should — ? Confound it ! there he was dreaming as usual, and

he knew, or at least he more than suspected, that the word of assent would never be won. Why not? Ah! there was the rub. If obstacle there was, the obstacle was Leslie. It was his practice to clear obstacles away, by fair means or by foul; and the thought that naturally occurred to him was how to clear Leslie out of his path.

Then came an equally natural revulsion of feeling. He hated himself; he shook himself in horror: to all intents and purposes he was a murderer, if not a thief; for if Grace had really given herself to Leslie, he contemplated stealing her away. And to this man whom he meant to wrong and rob he had vowed eternal gratitude. Looking up at those wild Highland hills, that day above Lochrosque came vividly back to his memory. He shuddered again as he recalled his feelings when his foot had failed him, when his brain was dizzy, when there seemed nothing between the strong young life and eternity. He remembered how he had thought of being summoned to the account for which he had never found time for preparation. And then, when all appeared to be doubly over, Leslie had volun-

tarily exposed himself to all that he dreaded. He had said little in the way of gratitude after that daring rescue and marvellous escape, but if he said little it was only because he felt so much. He was content to be silenced by misplaced *mauvaise honte*, because he was assured that his preserver entered into his feelings. But therefore, in love and honour he was doubly bound by that tacit compact. Now the occasion was offering duly to redeem his pledge ; nor could he have hoped for such a chance of clearing off old scores. If needful, he should rise to a sublime height of self-sacrifice ; for he really imagined at the moment that the act of resignation might entail upon him something like—lifelong suffering. He altogether forgot that he would be in no way a free agent, in that it was Grace who must really decide the matter, according to the state of her affections. But as he did forget the fact most entirely, we may give him equal credit for his self-denial. All the same, in his detestation of suspense he was eager to know the best and the worst of it ; and accordingly, after some four-and-fifty minutes of rapt meditation, he anticipated

the tryst with his cousin by a quarter of an hour.

He was kept waiting and gnawing his heart for nearly half an hour longer ; and when he did see Grace ascending the path, his hopes sank even lower than they had fallen already. No amount of mere maiden diffidence could explain the lingering pace of those light feet, and that listless and preoccupied gait. Had she been on her way to make a waiting lover happy, the shy timidity must have been buoyantly elastic. Her eyes, when she raised them to his, were full of a sad sympathy ; and as he saw how deeply she believed him to be in love, he felt more passionately and desperately in love with her than ever.

For a minute or more both were silent, and the silence began to become painfully embarrassing. Jack, whose manliness was unimpeachable, felt bound in his chivalry to be the first to break it. Interpreted by the expression of her face, it had rung the knell of his hopes as clearly as any words could have done ; and possibly he might have shown more delicacy of feeling had he taken it for his answer, and spoken on the strength of it.

But when it is a case of parting with our cherished hopes or illusions, we are slow to fling the haft after the blade ; and it was one of Jack's fundamental principles never to throw away a chance. Besides, although he was showing himself most practically disinterested, it was not in his nature to rise to those refined heights of generosity of which Ralph might have been capable. If he could not win his cousin and her love, at least by way of compensation he would have as much gratitude as she could give him. And that essential difference in the character of the two men may explain her preference for the one over the other.

Most men in the circumstances, even if they had delivered their minds, would have done so as the depressed or despairing lover. Jack did not. He began by affecting the modest confidence he did not feel ; and as he fairly warmed to what would otherwise have been a pleasant task, he pressed his suit with fire and fervour. And the girl felt more sorry for him than before, as he spoke much of love and little of money. Money, indeed, he could not altogether pass over ; but he spoke lightly

of his longing to be able to help her father at the slightest possible sacrifice to Moray's pride.

"It may all come so naturally and so easily, Grace. Surely he will accept anything from you ; and if you will only take me, he cannot make distinctions between his children. You know how fervently I have loved you from the very first. You know that nothing could have sealed my lips but the sense that I had nothing, while you were an heiress. You know—you must have known—that as I began to feel my feet, the ambition of winning you made each step a triumph. I counted the months before I dared speak, and the months were passing so slowly yet so quickly. May heaven forgive me for it ! but when I heard of your ruin, I believe at first it brought me more happiness than sorrow. I am confoundedly selfish," he interpolated, with penitent self-conviction. "And now, if you cannot speak to me as I could wish, the punishment of my selfishness will be greater than I can bear. But you cannot, surely, have the heart to throw me back on my worse self, and doom me to a life of selfish isolation ?

My future, for weal or woe, as for good or evil, is in your hands ; and my fate is hanging on what you have to say to me.”

Jack paused to draw breath, and indeed it was high time. He had talked himself into profound self-conviction, and the pleading eloquence of his eyes expressed as much. As for Grace, she had never doubted him ; and for once, all womanly as she was, she regretted the power of her charms. Had Leslie ever spoken as Jack had done—had he ever breathed a word on which she could find a promise of fidelity,—her course would have been clear, however painful. As it was, she hesitated ; and as Jack saw her hesitation, his hopes revived. After all, he might be mistaken ; and so once more, and this time with an easier conscience, he opened again the flood-gates of his eloquence. If Grace’s hesitation gave him hope, he made a fatal mistake. As he talked on, she kindly listened, for she knew all he had to say. She was imagining what would be their future if she spoke the irrevocable “yes.” And in her rapid self-searching, she as rapidly decided that she would do foul injustice to him as to herself. Leslie had never

spoken, it was true, but for reasons similar to those that had kept Jack silent. She trusted his sincerity as she trusted herself, and she felt that he had made his meaning unmistakable. She could not change her heart from an impulse of kindness — not even because the change might be for the benefit of her father — and she knew that her heart was given to Leslie beyond recall. It was through his family that hers had been indirectly brought to grief, and what must he think of her if she threw him over in the circumstances ? It was her melancholy lot to have to choose between two devoted lovers ; and she must give pain to one or the other. But there could be no further doubt as to the decision. And as she came to that conclusion, her dimpled chin and her under lip took something of her father's firmness ; and Jack, whose eyes were fixed on her face, felt, with a tremor, that it was all over. Then his own resolution was taken with his habitual promptitude. His hopes were already things of the past, and he would have leisure enough to make any moan over them. Now he must grasp the fleeting opportunity, and rise at once to the *rôle* of the generous.

As Grace, all in a tremble, was going to speak, he took the words out of her mouth :—

“ I have my answer, and I will spare you the pain of speaking it. I reverence you enough to know that if I were to talk on for hours, I could not bring you to change your decision. Nor do I desire it, things being as they are. I am not one of those who would strive to win my wife’s heart after marriage—least of all, when I have to contend with such a rival as Leslie. Forgive me,” he added hastily, as he saw his cousin flush up ; “ you may well pardon me in the circumstances, and I have no thought to give to the proprieties—even to the delicacies. But I must win free pardon by frank confession ; and for days, for months past, my doubts and fears have all been excited by a single man.”

Grace could say nothing. She could not confess an attachment which had never been avowed.

Jack, with his quick wits preternaturally sharpened, again came to help her out of her embarrassment. She could almost have wished that her affections had been free, that she might have given them to him frankly and grate-

fully. He took her hand ; and in the certainty that he understood her, she left it in his, and softly returned the pressure.

"Not another word — don't say another word ; we are friends as we are cousins, are we not ? and friends we shall ever continue. Or rather, we must remain brother and sister ; I have a right to claim as much as that. But be sure I shall ask no question which you might find it difficult to answer. Remember that I owe my life to somebody, and in time that remembrance must bring me consolation. And now," he went on, with a touch of bitterness, "if I must not speak of love, we may talk of business. You feel that you owe me something, do you not ? For after all, I offered you all I have to offer, and you have struck a blow in return you would gladly have spared me."

"You are the most lovable, the most generous of men, Jack !" exclaimed Grace, with a flood of tears that at last found vent.

"For heaven's sake, don't break down like that !" expostulated Jack, piteously, "or I shall have to follow suit ; and it is a sorrow I dare not console you under. And do not say

I am the most lovable of men," he said, as he tried to smile, "for I would still believe in your truth if I cannot have your affection. But I have yet another favour to demand, and you can be in no mood for refusing."

In her certainty as to what that favour was, Grace was again forced to remain silent.

"You must promise me for your father's sake, as for mine, that this shall make no difference as to money matters. You must promise that you will labour heart and soul to give me the poor comfort of being able to help you out of these troubles of yours. And for Leslie's sake as well, for you know I owe him this troublesome life of mine."

Perhaps Grace showed herself as generous as Jack, when, looking straight with her swimming eyes into his, she drew a long breath and said, "I promise." And by way of seal to the pledge, she frankly tendered him her cheek, and for a second time that day he took a cousinly kiss, though in circumstances sadly different.

## CHAPTER XXV.

## A HAPPY EXPLANATION.

MORAY had hoped against hope that light might break through the darkness; but as these first sad days went on, the clouds only thickened around him. Seldom had there been such a complete commercial disaster,—not even on that memorable Black Monday in the City, when the great “house at the corner” collapsed. For in this case most of the people concerned seemed to be not only hit hard, but actually knocked over. The great bulk of the shareholders were small folks—shopkeepers or farmers—who had confidently invested their savings in the bank shares. So the burden of the loss fell upon a mere handful of men, who were certainly believed to be extremely wealthy; but who nevertheless could hardly do more than meet

their enormous engagements: while between the two were a few gentlemen like Moray, who were rich, though a long way from being millionaires. And these seemed to be condemned to the grinding suspense of not knowing for months, or possibly for years, whether they were doomed to be simply brought to the brink of destitution or actually smashed up, lock, stock, and barrel. That was the formula in which Moray, who was a born sportsman, summed up his melancholy prospects. And meantime the clouds were thickening as his daughter's future became more hopelessly obscure. He had gone to Glasgow and to Edinburgh, where he had met Leslie, and where they had repeatedly "interviewed" the official liquidators. These gentlemen were civil, and even courteously sympathetic, to the wealthy Highland laird, as to the respected young Lothian landowner who accompanied him. But in the first place, their stock of sympathy was almost overdrawn by the victims who were filling the antechambers with their wails. And in the next place, as Leslie shrewdly suspected, they took a gratuitously gloomy view of the situation. It was their

business and duty to be on the safe side, and to secure each available shilling for the liquidation. They had actually laid a temporary embargo on the business of a flourishing provincial bank, which had been let in for a few of their shares by way of security for a small advance. They estimated the contingencies of calls at an absolutely indefinite quantity. They shook their heads over the chances of available assets from directors who had compromised themselves by doubtful speculations, and who might possibly be held legally liable for all the debts of the bank. The sagacious manager had made a bolt of it before the warrants for his arrest were abroad; and although he had left the cash-books and the ledgers behind him, it was more than possible that he might have tampered with them and falsified the accounts. In short, they proved genuine Job's comforters; and poor Moray, who had been worried by anxieties and want of sleep, chameleon-like took his colour from their grim prognostications. Leslie, on the contrary, rising to the occasion, showed a practical sagacity which Jack Venables might have envied. He asked shrewd questions;

he drew deductions from hesitating and prevaricating answers : and he came to the conclusion that, so far as Moray was concerned, things in the end might turn out to be far less than hopeless.

Nevertheless, as the clouds kept thickening over his prospects, the sense of oppression weighing on Moray became wellnigh intolerable. He was a man whose spirits rose to danger, and who was never more cheerful or more buoyant than when playing some dangerous game. Except that he had been much in the habit of smiling in other circumstances, it might have been said of him, as of the Baron of Mortham, that

“ Ill was the omen if he smiled,  
For 'twas in peril stern and wild.”

Many a time he had carried his life in his hand, feeling that it was on the point of slipping through his fingers. He had been afloat in Malay proas in cyclones, when the circling hurricane had rent the sails into tatters, and shivered the long tapering masts as they dragged at the groaning decks. He had crawled in the jungle-lair of the skulking tiger, looking out for the glimmer of the green

eyes of the savage in act to spring. But hitherto he had always faced his dangers in the open, with the sense that the *dénouement* would be speedily decided. Now he felt as if he were battened down beneath the hatches, in a craft that was driving on to the coral-reefs of a lee shore. He might drift clear of the danger by a series of special providences, and escape somehow by the skin of his teeth. Or, on the other hand, he might be dragging inevitably towards the breakers, and he could not lift a finger to save himself. His impulse was to escape from the deadlock upon any terms, and to make another unhampered start in life, even although he should start afresh under the load of years and disappointments.

There Leslie's calm good sense was invaluable, with the ascendancy he had gradually established over the older and more energetic man. After trying various arguments and failing with them, he fell back upon one he felt sure must be effective.

" If you were lonely and childless, my dear uncle, I should not venture to protest against any decision of yours, however much I might regret it. But you have Grace to consider as

well as yourself, and surely you have no right to sacrifice her interests ? That suspense must be intolerable to your energies, I can understand ; but we cannot choose the form of our trials for ourselves : all we can do is to bear them with cool and calculating resolution. You are one of the bravest men I have ever met ; and you know yourself what you would say of a precipitate surrender in battle, when the lives of those who were dearest to you depended on prolonging the struggle."

As he spoke Leslie watched his uncle anxiously, and he was less grieved than surprised when the other incontinently flared up. Fiery by temperament and irritable from his trials, Moray burst out so strongly and so fiercely that Leslie felt inclined to answer him in kind. He coloured all over, and as he compressed his lips he nearly bit them till the blood came. Never, perhaps, had his habitual self-restraint sent him through so severe an ordeal. Not even when he had saved Venables on the rocks above Lochrosque had he resigned himself to a self-sacrifice so heroic. But when, after a few moments of silence, he returned the soft answer that turneth away wrath, he knew

already that he had his reward. Moray's nature was as generous as it was hot, and already he repented his hasty speech. So he fully appreciated the generosity of his nephew; and being the more eager to make reparation, was more absolutely swayed than he might otherwise have been.

" You are quite right," he went on ; " you can judge of things more coolly than I can. And now show me that I have your forgiveness by telling me what you recommend."

" It seems to me," said Leslie, speaking modestly but firmly, " that the path of duty is plain. Considering the circumstances that have brought you to unmerited ruin, you may imagine what it costs me to say as much. You must and will meet your engagements, but you must resign yourself to wait and learn what they actually are. If I thought things desperate, I should advise differently. But I don't. From what those liquidators say, it is clear there are sundry chances in your favour. The manager may be collared, or may be pricked by his conscience—and something may come of that. Then there is that defaulting and absconding director, whose

property must be liable to the uttermost farthing. He has been speculative, and has locked up money, but possibly he may not have been altogether foolish. He has been dabbling in Colorado gold and Idaho silver, and his hands may hold some trumps, as we know was the case with Jack Venables. In any case, your only course is to wait."

"I suppose you are right, Ralph," sighed Moray; "but what is to be done in the meantime? All my property may be attached by the creditors of the bank, and my conscience could never suffer me to live on other people. I should never digest my meals, and each glass of wine would seem to choke me. Then the suspense with the inactivity would fret me to death, and each day as it dragged by would be slow torture."

To that Leslie could answer nothing honestly. Had he been in his uncle's place, he would have suffered in the same way.

Moray resumed: "Yet if I did go to work again, it would be a disheartening case of *non vobis*. Is it not 'Eothen' who says that wounded spirits naturally tend to seek a sanctuary in the East? Well, I have more

practical reasons for going thither, and back to the East I am determined to go. Yet it is hard to face the separation from Grace, when any good fortune that might be in reserve for me would not be for her."

"But you talk, sir," said Ralph, "as if you were ruined already. Yet we have just agreed that it is altogether uncertain, since otherwise you might promptly liquidate and go free."

"True. But were you in my place, you would be loath to draw another cheque on your bankers. It might touch my honour afterwards, putting slighter considerations out of the question; and you ought to know better than any man, how a *cas de conscience* has troubled me already."

"I know it; and you know how I felt and spoke when you confided your anxieties to me. Surely, for those very reasons, you may trust me now. Well, it seems to me, on my soul and conscience, that you are going too fast and much too far. Your future is dark, unquestionably; but I fancy it will be brighter than you believe. You must wait and see. Of course, in prudence as in honour, you are bound to restrict your expenditure; but there

is no reason why you should not live respectably and like a gentleman in the meantime, preparing your resources for possible calls. Remember Grace."

Moray was not unwilling to be persuaded. Ralph Leslie, who had sympathised formerly with his fine-spun scruples, had now become his conscience and almost his honour. And after all, Leslie might be right in believing that things were by no means so bad as they appeared.

So the next pressing business was to put everything on the most economical footing ; and the arrangements, painful as they were, at all events occupied his mind, and were so far serviceable. There was no difficulty about getting rid of the house in London : on the whole, he preferred to let it furnished—although at one time he almost decided to sell, on the principle that some sudden turn in his affairs might make him regret his precipitancy. He was doomed to grope painfully in the dark. As a Celt he was somewhat inclined to superstition, and the darkness is favourable to superstitious fancies. After all, the house in town was a mere matter for the

house-agent. But the question of Glenconan lay near to his heart, and the idea of having to part with it was dragging at his heart-strings. It was with extreme relief, then, and no little joy and gratitude, that he received a couple of seasonable offers. Calverley Baker wrote a rather blunt business-like letter, though civilly worded, proposing to take the mansion and shootings for a term of three years, at a rent to be settled between his lawyers and those of Mr Moray. At the close of his tenancy, as he added politely, he hoped to hand the property back to the proprietor with as good a head of game as when he received it. By the very next post came a communication from Winstanley, almost to the same effect, except that he spoke of renting Glenconan from year to year, that he might be ready to give it back to its master on the shortest notice. But Winstanley's letter was a model of delicacy and kindly feeling; and though Moray knew the diplomatic gifts of his friend, he could not help fancying that Julia had inspired it. When he took Grace into his confidence and showed her the letter, she quite agreed with him. She laid her finger

unhesitatingly on certain passages, saying they had certainly been dictated or suggested by Julia. For, since she had heard of the love-passages between Miss Winstanley and Glenconan, her feelings towards that young lady had altogether changed, and she was eager to make atonement for having misunderstood her.

But that point being settled to their mutual satisfaction, Grace was greatly surprised to find that her father inclined to treat with Mr Baker.

“With Baker there can be no sort of obligation,” he said. “He will have full value for his money, which he chiefly cares about, and it will be a mere matter of pounds, shillings, and pence.”

“So it would, sir—and for that reason, surely you will give Mr Winstanley the preference. He wishes to be friendly—Julia desires it much more—and I am sure it would be a satisfaction to you to gratify both of them. And—and—”

“And I had better begin to practise humility, you would say, and learn to put my pride in my pocket. Well, my dear, I daresay you

are right. It is a hard lesson to learn, but it cannot be learned too soon."

So it was settled, and settled promptly. Moray was not a man to hang upon a decision of the kind; though characteristically he sent a letter to his agents, desiring them not to drive too hard a bargain in the circumstances. "I am bound," he said, "to do as well for my possible creditors as I should have done for myself, but assuredly I cannot be bound to do any better." And it was with strangely mingled feelings that he set his signature to the lease of his shootings. On the one hand, he went all the lighter that his mind was made up beyond present reconsideration; on the other hand, he had drained a bitter cup, and he felt as if his spirits were crushed by the dissipation of a life's day-dreams. He had realised the cherished hopes of his youth and middle age. He had come home while yet in the pride of strength and health, to settle down on his hereditary wastes, with superfluities in place of encumbrances. Above all, he had been reunited to the daughter who was so dear to him, and had looked to his wealth and estates descending to her children.

Now he was on the eve of another, perhaps a lifelong separation, and to all intents and purposes Grace might be left a beggar. What was certain was, that with the least possible delay he must deliberately determine on his course of action. Resignation to the will of Providence was very well in its way. He had listened with apparent complacency, curbing his impatience, to the worthy minister of Glenconan's homilies on the subject; but new enterprises were the only tonic that could react on his energetic nature.

He had never much liked London, as we know, but never had he found it so hateful as when he went south in search of occupation. It recalled the visit of some thirty years before, when he had started from London a boyish adventurer, before his first expedition to the East. He shrank sadly from the old associations, and yet he haunted the scenes that recalled them. There was the old Tavistock Hotel in Covent Garden, with the same smells of the decaying cabbages without, and the memories of the water-cresses and skim-milk on the breakfast-tables of the coffee-room within. There were the pit-doors of Drury

Lane and of the Haymarket, where he used to laugh at the humours of Buckstone. How lightly he laughed at anything in those days ! what an appetite he used to have for chops and oysters at the jovial suppers in the Halls of Harmony! Yet after all, on second thoughts, his appetite and digestion only a few weeks before had been almost as good as ever. His troubles were ageing him prematurely, yet he could not afford to be ill. He must summon all the powers of his will to his aid, and he would seek to summon them accordingly. Sometimes they would answer to the call, often they would positively refuse ; and nothing wastes and wears the constitution more surely than the perpetual effort to subjugate the sentiments to the will.

He had made up his mind to go back to the East, and in his constant conversations with his daughter he had made no secret of his intentions. In the East he was sure of finding occupation, and, at all events, a competent income in the meantime. It was too late, as he told himself, to amass a second fortune ; yet, after all, who could say ? Not even with the advance of years, and under pressure of

disappointments, does a Raleigh lightly renounce the golden dreams which cheered him along the path of his early adventures. Moray's old mercantile acquaintances in the City showed themselves friendly enough : he was a man to whom they might make liberal offers of help, in the assurance that any offers would be charily accepted. And he had pretty nearly resolved as to how he was to begin again, and was thinking already of securing a cheap passage in a screw-liner for Singapore, and of seeing about his slender outfit.

In his talks with Grace he had made no secret of his intentions ; and he was surprised, and somewhat hurt indeed, at her strange insensibility on the subject. Seeing that he had set his heart upon going, she seemed to take his going as a matter of course—which was all very well, and so far satisfactory. He would have been sorry that she should have broken her heart over the separation, but he looked for a display of much natural feeling. He looked in vain : there was nothing of the kind. Grace discussed his plans with a calmness which would have done credit to a stoic, but which sat indifferently on a generally im-

pressionable young girl, who had always been the spoiled darling of a doting parent.

But there is often a silver lining to the blackest of clouds, and they may be bursting with unexpected blessings when we fancy them pregnant with trouble. Moray, for his own sake as well as for hers, tried hard to make apologies for Grace ; nevertheless the stinging suspicion of her heartlessness and ingratitude was fretting his very soul. Had it not been for the peculiar circumstances of his case, which disposed him to see everything *en noir*, the loving and large-minded father could scarcely have been so perversely unjust : the whole tenor of his daughter's life and conduct should have pled for her. As it was, he began to figure himself as a Lear, while his Cordelia was changing to a Regan or a Goneril. The tone of his mind was reflected in his manner ; and Grace, to her grief and pain, became conscious of the cloud between them. When, one morning, in growing desperation, he determined to bring matters to a point : he had an interview with the head of a mercantile firm in Leadenhall Street, and then dropped in at the office of a steamship company in Billiter

Square. Contemning alike cabs and omnibuses, he strode homewards to the west by the Thames Embankment, and turned up at the door of their lodgings in Ebury Street, Pimlico, pale, sad, but determined.

Grace, who was sitting down to a solitary luncheon, jumped up with delight.

“I had given you up, papa, and I am so happy to see you. Julia Winstanley has been here, and insists on driving me down to Richmond in the afternoon. You will come with us, will you not? Finette is longing for a run in the country;” and she patted the setter that lay stretched on the hearthrug. “In the meantime sit down, and let me give you a slice of this cold mutton: there is nothing else, so you may as well be contented.”

Moray sat down in silence, and left her to help him. His silence was almost as chilling as the kiss with which he had answered her effusive embrace. Never perhaps had a pair who loved each other so dearly felt so miserably ill at ease.

“You will come with us, father, will you not?” said Grace again; “though indeed I only accepted conditionally. But an hour or

two in Richmond Park will do you as much good as Finette. You look as if you wanted a little change and the fresh air of the country," she added, anxiously.

"I shall soon have change enough, Grace," answered Moray, gravely. "I have booked a berth for Singapore in the Fire King, for the 14th of next month,—not much more than a fortnight hence, as you see, and my hands will be full enough in the meantime."

At which announcement Grace's heart jumped up to her throat, and she strove in vain to repress her emotion. She was seized with a trembling in every limb, till the fork in her hand clattered against her wine-glass. Her father watched her with mingled pain and curiosity. He set down her emotion to remorse and regret; and though the display of feeling came rather late, nevertheless his heart warmed to her. He was about going to tell her kindly not to vex herself, since she knew that the inevitable separation must come sooner or later, when she took the speech out of his mouth. She would have given the world to have spoken calmly and more promptly, since she wanted to appear to speak naturally.

"Taken *our* berths, papa, did you say? and without saying a word to me: surely that was somewhat precipitate. I must say, I thought you would have consulted me, and at least have given me a glimpse at my cabin beforehand."

If Grace's fork had clattered against the glasses, her father let his fall from his hand. A delightful light began to break out of the blackness, irradiating the past, the present, and the future. Then the misgivings that had haunted him must have been phantoms of his own conjuring; and Grace, in her affectionate innocence, had taken it for granted that she was to be the companion of his exile. Now, if the truth must be told, the artless Miss Grace was not half so innocent as she had wished to appear. She had determined from the first to go with her father: she had felt persuaded that he would not have her company on any terms. On mature consideration, she had come to the conclusion that her best chance was to bide her time, and treat the arrangement as a matter of course. Absorbed in that idea, she had failed to realise how entirely her father had misunderstood her motives; and when of a

sudden he sprang the mine upon her that morning, she had been agitated by the idea of the *rôle* she had to play, and the issues involved in her playing it successfully. That she had broken down in the circumstances was a matter of course, since rehearsals are indispensable to the most experienced actors : she knew she had failed ignominiously in carrying off the situation, and she sat before her father as a self-convicted impostor.

So it was ; he saw through her transparent device—and in another moment he held her clasped in his arms, and was covering her face and hair with his kisses. He could not speak, for he was thoroughly ashamed of the confession he would have to make ; and with one single exception he would have done anything to atone for his suspicions. Grace saw through him as he had seen through her, and yet she generously refrained from reproaching him. The generosity came all the more easily to her, that in his melting and penitent mood she was sure to mould him to her wishes. She would strike while the iron was hot, and have it over.

“ Well, papa—of course we must give up

the drive to Richmond. I shall send Julia a note of apology, and we shall go down to the office, or to the docks, if the Fire King happens to be lying there. You may have forgotten about my cabin," she added, with a smile, "and in that case the sooner we see to it the better. Do you think I can arrange to take Finette into it with me? I am sure she would be miserable if she had her quarters in the steerage."

But Grace did not know her father quite so well as she fancied. He was overflowing with the dammed-back reserves of love, let loose in this sudden opening of the sluice-gates. He was melting with the tenderness that comes of remorse for cruelty gratuitously practised on a cherished object. His feelings were those of the mourner who has learned too late of injustice towards the darling of whom death has bereaved him; only happily now there was no "too late" in the matter, and he had opportunity, if it so pleased him, of making ample reparation. For that very reason Moray stood firm; and while his heart was of wax, his will was of iron.

"Say no more, Grace—say no more, my

dearest girl : God knows that, with the best and fondest intentions, you have only tortured me too terribly already. You know that I never go back from my word,"—he caught the hand she raised, in deprecation, in both of his, and covered it with kisses,—“you know I never go back from my word ; and I say and swear that, things being as they are, nothing will tempt me to let you share my doubtful prospects. Besides,” he added, with a forced smile, addressing himself to her practical good sense,—“besides, you would not wish to hang upon my arms, when age is threatening to weaken them at any rate.”

If he had feared that Grace would press her plea, he must have been agreeably disappointed. It is possible that he might have felt aggrieved by her calm acquiescence, had he not been still smarting from the lesson against jumping to hasty conclusions. Be that as it may, she said nothing—though, like the famous parrot of the fable, she may have thought all the more.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

VENABLES À LA RECOUSSE.

ALTHOUGH Moray and his daughter had been naturally leading a secluded life, it must not be supposed that they were left alone in London. Dull time of the year as it was—for it was yet early in drear November—people were already coming back to town. The Winstanleys were there—Winstanley, as we know, always welcomed the earliest opportunity of getting back to his beloved clubs and City boards; so it was the more to his credit or to his daughter's that he had tied himself by a lease of Glenconan. Ralph Leslie was there, still busying himself, when he could, over the affairs of the liquidation; occasionally taking flying trips to Glasgow, when, sorely against his tastes, he would travel third class; and striving to distract himself from his vari-

ous anxieties by hard work. He had to carry all the load of Moray's troubles, for he never forgot how they had been caused. And the future of his cousin lay near to his heart—and his own future as well; for was not the one inextricably bound up with the other? He used to say to himself that he was selfish, as very likely he was; but selfishness in certain circumstances may almost become a virtue, and at any rate must command the sympathies of humanity. Yet, strange to say, with all that was weighing upon him, he found he had the power of turning to his literary pursuits with such concentrated exaltation as he had never experienced before. He always turned with an effort, but the effort was almost invariably rewarded. He looked forward with mingled pleasure and dread to the later hours of the evening. He would dine very frugally in his rooms—a more economical and agreeable arrangement than taking his meal in the mixed society of his club. After dinner he would doze and dream, and trifle with some light book—anything his indolence suggested, to put off the evil hour of pulling himself together and summon-

ing his fancies. But once seated at his table, with parenthetical stridings up and down the floor, the clouds would clear from his brain as scales seemed to be falling from his brightening eyes. He was transported, into fair fields of the imagination, where he might have forgotten the hard prose of the present, had it not been for a perpetually uneasy feeling that the bent bow must not be permitted to fly back under some dimly realised penalty. That the double strain was doing deadly harm there could be no doubt ; the poetical inspirations, which acted like the oriental's *haschish*, transporting him into a dreamland which bordered on brain fever, was a blending of opiate and stimulant with subtle poison. All the same, a new poem was growing fast under his hand, more ambitious in its tone and its stately Spenserian measure than any he had yet attempted. Scheme it had none ; it seemed to work out of itself, by suggestions independent of his thoughts and volitions. Scheme it had none ; yet it seemed to be shaping itself in forms of grandeur and beauty that surprised and intoxicated him. He was by no means puffed up, and he wrote

in fear and trembling, dashing the lines down in haste, lest his fancies should suddenly fail him. His pen seemed the instrument of a mysterious power ; he felt as one of the Hebrew prophets might have felt, soaring on the pinions of the spirit above the tabernacle of fleshly humanity. Yet as each prophetic utterance bore the stamp of the speaker's individuality, whether he came from the rugged water-courses of Gilead or the soft green meadows by the Jordan, so Leslie wove his own deep and sad recent experiences into the tissue of his web, and coloured the threads with the tints of his consuming passion. He drew fresh excitement and a broader range of versatility from what might be called his humble self-consciousness. His fear was that his pinions might fail him any day, and that in the midst of his adventurous flight he might come tumbling broken-backed to ground. Even then he comforted himself with the hope that his labours might not have been altogether wasted,—that he might leave a fragment to found a reputation, if Grace cared for that, like Coleridge's half-sung lay of "Christabel," or the strain of him

“Who left half-told  
The story of Cambuscan bold.”

Meanwhile, night after night he worked late or less late, as it might be, for his inspiration would leave him with scarcely a second of warning. It was not its nature to flicker down like a dying candle ; on the contrary, it was turned off of a sudden, like the jet of a gas-burner. Happily, though often his visions would revisit him in his bed, sometimes he slept the sleep of the dreamless. Nevertheless his strong constitution was being sapped : his sunken cheeks showed a hectic flush in place of the old rosy hues of health ; and there was a feverish glitter in the eyes that had once been so calm and clear. He gave little thought to his own health : had he cared more, he might have consoled himself, had he known all. We know that pity is akin to love ; but when love and pity are close allies as well as kinsfolk, the one fans the flame of the other. The sight of Leslie, whom she saw constantly, went as constantly to the innermost recesses of Grace's heart. Her great compassion grew, as she began to be greatly alarmed ; and had he thought the

time a fitting one to question her as to her feelings, the answer would have been given in a form that must have surpassed his fondest hopes. Even with his diffidence, as he caught her eyes fixed on his, as he saw her turn her head aside to conceal the tears that filled them, he must have been more modest and much less observant than he was, had he not more than suspected the truth.

As for Jack Venables, who found himself not unfrequently in company of the lovers, he had not a doubt on the matter, and it confirmed him in his new and manly resolutions.

“What a fool I was nearly making of myself!” he said to himself; “and what is worse, I was within an ace of behaving like a villain. Well, one thing I will say—that girl is enough to make a fool or a scoundrel of anybody with more passion than principle. Upon my word, I would willingly look as ill as Ralph—and he does look ill, and I shall send him to see Cutler—I would almost look as ill as Ralph to be pitied as she pities him. But, unluckily, that’s past praying for, and my appetite is perfect, and I shall go and order dinner.”

Which he did, and he did ample justice to

the meal. But nevertheless, Jack's monologue was delivered rather ruefully ; and as yet, he still felt more deeply than he would have been willing to allow. With the tempting prize he had stretched his hand for hanging immediately but impossibly beyond his reach, it was not in his nature that his heart-wounds should heal all at once. But all the same, as he knew, they were scarring over, and he was content to wait for the cure which he began to hope might be expected.

For Mr Venables had likewise come up to town ; and having unconscionably extended a long leave, was again engrossed in his arduous secretarial duties. He could do nothing for his uncle now, except cheer and sympathise with him ; so, of course, he busied himself in his own affairs—social, political, and commercial—for, like Leslie, Jack felt in need of distraction. To do him bare justice, he was deeply grieved that Glenconan would accept nothing in the way of pecuniary help—that he would even give no promise as to the future, except that he would sooner address himself to Jack than to anybody. When he added, however, by way of after-thought, “unless,

perhaps, Ralph Leslie," he was so struck by the look of annoyance on his favourite's face, that, suspecting that poor Jack was now altogether out of the running, he laid a hand on his arm, and said kindly—

"Perhaps, to tell the truth, I *would* rather come to you first; for, though Ralph is the kindest and most affectionate of nephews, I have always regarded you as a boy of my own."

Still he remained peremptory as ever on the main point, and the very warmth of his expressions was cold comfort to Jack. How well we should have got on as father and son-in-law, he thought, and what a pleasant little family-party we might have made! Then he thought too, and with honest vexation, that, after all his fine promises and noble resolutions of self-sacrifice, he must seem something like a humbug to his cousin Grace. It was true that her father had proved obdurate beyond expectation: it was true, it was not his fault that she had not been able to show him how he could help them. Nevertheless, all the same, if he were not a humbug, he was in a somewhat ridiculous position—and to ridicule Jack was particularly sensitive.

Now it will be remembered that at the close of the happy explanation with her parent in the last chapter, Grace had remained silent and preoccupied. In fact her mind was full of a resolution she must lose no time in carrying out. Jack had been complaining that she had asked him to do nothing for her: he really seemed to bear her a grudge for breaking the terms of their compact. Well, he should no longer have even the semblance of a grievance, and she would tax his generosity to the uttermost. She knew it was a melancholy pleasure to him to see her, even in his character of rejected suitor: she half smiled, though there was moisture in her eyes as she thought so. Well, she was going to ask him to send her away from him; to use all his efforts and all his influence to procure her father some fixed appointment and a place of residence in the East. If that were assured him, it would cut the ground from under his feet, upon which he had chiefly objected to taking her along with him. Whether Jack could do it, she did not know; but she had a woman's faith in his star and in his rising fortunes. That he would do his best, she did

not doubt ; for she had a woman's faith in the loyalty of the man who had honestly, though hopelessly, loved her.

Jack was seated in state in the offices of the President of the Council. Lord Wrekin was far away—belated over a course of the waters at Aix-les-Bains—and Jack had taken possession of the presence-chamber, and was filling his lordship's chair of state. In the dignity of that position, he held subversive and democratic views. He declared to himself that in an effete state of society, rank and age received undue recognition. Here was Lord Wrekin, who was a worse victim to the gout than his brother, promoted to his highly responsible post on the score of being a peer and a sexagenarian ; while he, who was really discharging the duties of the office, was declared by a stupid prejudice to be ineligible for a position in which, as he flattered himself, he might have shone.

He was disturbed from an Alnaschar-like reverie—in which he was lightly leaping from office to office, in a rise to the upper ranks of the peerage—by the entrance of the messenger. Jack started and blushed, as if the man

could have read his absurdities ; and then his features assumed an expression of dignified austerity, which was equally absurd, and quite perceptible to the messenger. But the well-trained official repressed a grin, and announced deferentially, “ A lady to see you, sir.”

Now Jack, in the discharge of his delicate duties, had not only to answer a great variety of cream-laid and wire-woven notes with gorgeous blazons or eccentric monograms, but to receive a good many “ ladies of quality ” who preferred to transact their little affairs in person. Some of these *grandes dames* were welcome enough ; but there were one or two exceptionally assiduous in attendance, who had long ago become his *bêtes noires*, if we dare apply so rough an expression to the gentler sex. So Jack inquired, with real concern, whether Bateson chanced to know the lady.

“ Never saw her before, Mr Venables,” was the unhesitating reply ; “ but I think, sir,” he added with overdone stolidity, “ that perhaps you might not object to receive her.”

A wink at all times was as good as a nod to Jack.

"It is really excessively inconvenient at this hour; but—well, I don't know. Bring the lady up, Bateson—beg her to walk up."

Up she walked accordingly; and had she been stepping on bare boards, the light tripping foot so familiar to Jack's ear would have fallen unfamiliarly, it was set down so deliberately. But the thick pile of the Turkey carpets deadened all sound; and when Bateson threw back the door a second time, the secretary was buried in the perusal of a voluminous state-paper. Almost before the door had gently closed again, a light silvery laugh disturbed the hypocrite. He sprang to his feet; he pitched the document behind him, where it fell into the fire and burnt away unregarded. For in another moment Jack had caught his cousin in his arms, and pressed his lips upon her cheek before he consented to release her.

"Well, I declare, sir," she exclaimed, as she blushed, and laughed again, and arranged her bonnet—"well, I declare, sir, if I had doubted about my reception, your warmth of welcome ought to reassure me. And I, who had always innocently imagined that the office of Lord

President of the Council embodied all that was most ceremonious and formal!"

"And so it does, Grace, in an ordinary way;" and he thought grimly of one or two of his most dreaded visitors. "But you see, we allow ourselves a considerable discretion; and so, in exceptional instances, we relax the rules."

"Then the sooner they are tightened again the better, I should say." And then, remembering the grave business on which she had come, the change on her own countenance was sudden enough in all conscience. Jack remarked it at once, and knew the business she had come upon as well as if she had already told him. He remembered, too, that the unseasonable freedom of his reception might leave her, upon second thoughts, ill at ease. She had come to her cousin unchaperoned, and he had treated her cavalierly, as he would never have behaved to her, unless under extreme provocation, in her own drawing-room. On the instant there 'was a corresponding change in him. All the kindness of his manner remained, but the fervour had died out of it; and no precisian of the straiter sect of the

Puritans could have been more gently formal. If he had sinned, the best reparation he could make was to spare her all further embarrassments.

"And now, Grace, to tell me what you have come about, if you think it worth while. Or rather go straight to the point, and let me know what I can do to serve my uncle. If you knew how I had wearied and waited for this hour, you would not be surprised that my raptures betrayed me into extravagance."

Grace looked with her frank eyes into his, and blushing again, her looks more than thanked him. She fancied they understood each other so well—and she was right—that she wasted not a single breath upon civilities, but went indeed very straight to the point. She told him how she was situated ; she painted the terror and grief with which she regarded separation ; and she wound up by saying—

"Should he go out as he proposes, on something like a wild-goose chase, he will leave me behind, and there is no help for it. His heart-strings are entwined so firmly with mine, that nothing I can urge will possibly move him ; and though I know he will suffer as much as

I, my tears will harden instead of melting him. Whereas, if I could manage what he believes to be impossible, and get him some reasonably good engagement, with fixed headquarters, he stands committed in honour as in tenderness, and can hardly possibly draw back. Oh, Jack !”

Jack sat in silence looking down, and drumming on the table with his fingers. Grace had a horrible sinking of the heart. Was she to be disappointed, after all, in her volatile cousin ? and had she been trusting to a bending reed ? But the doubt was only momentary, and her cousin glanced up with a face that was at once reassuring and resolute. She had never seen him look so much of the man ; indeed, as he rose to his feet, with his strong figure and smiling face, and seeming to hold her destiny in his hands, he appeared to her overstrained nerves very much of the demigod. He took a turn or two along the great rug without speaking, and when he did speak, it seemed as if he were weighing each word, very contrary to his usual custom.

“ You have given me the opportunity I prayed for, Grace ; now it is for me to avail

myself of it. I would not raise false hopes for the world, for I would guard against adding to your anxieties by disappointment. But I solemnly swear by what I hold most sacred—and that is my brotherly love for you—that I shall spare neither effort, influence, nor self-esteem in trying to help you to the object you desire. I shall push requests as I should never push them for myself; and you know," he added, with a smile, "that I have a very sufficient stock of impudence. As for the rest, it is in the hands of Providence; but I have a strong idea that Providence will smile upon us. And who knows, but that if Providence should interest itself in us, I may have the opportunity of killing two birds with one stone, and paying off an instalment of my debt to Ralph? If he saw that it was all comparatively smooth sailing with Glenconan, I see no reason why you and Ralph should not marry. Do you?"

"Oh, dear Jack, how very good you are! But—but—he has never asked me."

"Well, he will then—you may take my word for that—and perhaps before many days are over. And now I must send you sum-

marily away, for I have many things to turn over in my mind, much to the injury of her Majesty's service. Besides, there is Mr Bateson's knock at the door : if Bateson interrupts a business interview of this sort, you may be very sure that the summons is urgent."

## CHAPTER XXVII.

## THE SUMATRA COLONISATION COMPANY.

ALL Jack's best feelings were awakened, and his pride was piqued besides. He warmed up very easily to the luxury of doing a kind action ; and here was such a chance as he had scarcely hoped for, and would certainly never have again. To know that he had been able to befriend Grace and her father, would be a constant source of happiness for years to come ; nor was he sorry to have the opportunity of so far clearing scores with Ralph Leslie. Moreover, it was much to him to play the patron to such a man as Moray—the *deus ex machina* to such a girl as Grace. If he did not rise to the opportunity, it should not be his fault ; and the immediate question was how to set about it.

Never, when he had been planning and

scheming for himself, had his quick and busy brain been so active as when he strolled meditatively out of Whitehall through the Horse Guards and made his way across St James's Park. He chose to dine by himself in a quiet corner of the coffee-room of the Blue Posts, that his meditations might not be interrupted by club gossip; and when he dropped late in the evening into the smoking-room at the Junior Carlton, of which establishment he had lately become a member, his plan of operations was pretty well arranged. What with his sanguine spirits and a pint of the old port of "the Posts," he began already to feel tolerably confident; though his hopes were vague enough, and he looked forward to rebuffs, and even to mortifications. But what of that? *Qui veut la fin, veut les moyens.* He was not asking for himself, and he would resign himself to put up with unpleasantness.

But man proposes and the higher powers overrule. Jack attained his object with the minimum of effort—in fact, by an almost incredible stroke of good-fortune, though he plumed himself, with some reason, on a bit

of diplomacy which might have touched more scrupulous consciences.

There were sundry smokers scattered about the smoking-room, singly or in groups; and the eyes of the new-comer rested at once on a consequential individual seated by himself,—no less a man than Sir Stamford Scraper, chairman of three great companies, and director of three times as many more. Jack knew Sir Stamford pretty well—had met him repeatedly at Winstanley's table or elsewhere, and disliked him. On this occasion, in answer to a rather condescending nod and sign, our friend strolled up to him. Nay, when Sir Stamford favoured him with four stiff fingers, he pressed them with cordiality. It was much for Sir Stamford to give as many as four fingers to any man under the rank of a wealthy peer or a Governor of the Bank of England—more especially to one so young as our friend; but Jack, in other circumstances, would have resented not having the thumb as well.

"Glad to see you, Venables," said the great man, very affably; and as he made room on the couch beside him, Jack accepted the

proffered seat, and rang for coffee and cigarettes.

“ And how has the world been using you, Venables ? ” the other went on, with the undertone of patronage that was so intensely irritating.

“ Fairly enough, as times go,” answered Jack lightly, swallowing down his rising annoyance as a morsel of the humble-pie he had made up his mind for. He meant to turn the conversation towards business matters ; for one of his companion’s great companies had its operations in the far East—and here was the very opening he wanted.

“ Fairly enough ; ” and though it suited him to keep his temper and be civil, as it would not at all serve his purpose to be crowded over, he began slightly to swagger, and to be more confidential than he would otherwise have been. He had to remind the big speculator that he was something more than Winstanley’s right-hand man ; that he might be considered a rising power in the City circles himself, having done remarkably well in a wonderfully short time.

“ Ay, one other bit of luck I have had, by

the way," he added, by way of postscript to a rather romantic story of successful enterprise, and as if this unconsidered trifle had almost escaped his recollection. "One other bit of luck I have had, and all the pleasanter that it came of a hit among the Yankees."

And then he gave a sketch of the affairs of the silver-mine which made Sir Stamford open the eyes of envy and admiration, and regard his young acquaintance with greater consideration than before. He was one of those men who identify good luck with great practical talents—a mistake into which neither Winstanley nor Mr Venables was at all likely to fall. Sir Stamford had been dining alone, too, or at least in company of a bottle of the club's best Burgundy; and altogether he was more inclined to talk than usual. To do him justice, he had much too high an opinion of himself to hesitate to mention any mistakes he might have made or any misfortunes he might have met with. But he thought it might be useful if this clever and pushing young man would play jackal to his lion in *moments perdus*.

"Oh yes! there will be ups and downs in speculation. Hitherto you seem to have had

all the ups ; the more reason for your looking out for some of the downs. And I don't mind owning that I have had a sharpish experience of them of late, though I may boast that I have done better than most people. You know the story of those electric-lighting companies ? ”

For Sir Stamford had notoriously bought a variety of patents cheap ; and having transferred his concessions to sundry companies (limited), had made great profits by the original transactions. How far he had subsequently burned his fingers with the shareholders, when premiums had vanished away like smoke, and shares fallen like mercury in the frosts of December, was a question that had been much discussed in the City articles.

“ As well as any outsider can. But between you and me, Sir Stamford, you must permit me to doubt whether so shrewd a financier as you has not succeeded in keeping on the weather-gage. Let the storms blow as they will, some folks have the knack of floating ashore, and saving the bulk of their little property besides.”

Sir Stamford, as Jack had surmised, felt flattered rather than annoyed. To any man

of sensitive honour, the questionable compliment would have been a gross insult; but promoters and professional financiers have codes of morality of their own.

"Well, Mr Venables, between you and me, as you say, perhaps I have not done so very badly. All the same, I have made far less than I had reason to expect; and so far the electric mania has been disappointing. It is all a question of time, of course; but I have no fancy for the philanthropy that is to serve posterity. And I really thought only a year ago that we had cut the gas-pipes and turned off the gas."

"Everything comes to him who waits," remarked Jack, sententiously. "You remember the favourite saying of the late French Emperor. And you are as likely to live for another quarter of a century as any man I know."

It was another stroke of dexterous flattery. Sir Stamford, who was of a somewhat sanguine complexion, and apoplectic, dreaded death as much as any man who has consecrated himself to the exclusive worship of Mammon. He liked Mr Venables more and more; he mar-

velled that he had been so long blind to his best qualities.

“That threadbare bit of comfort might be all very well, if we could all hope to live to the age of Methuselah. But in the meanwhile things will keep going wrong, and somehow it may take a deuce of a time to bring them round again. You know something of the half-yearly reports of joint-stock companies in difficulties ?”

“As I trust none of yours are. I am not talking, of course, of the Electrical Illumination, which certainly seems to be pretty well quenched for the present.”

“Well, no ; not exactly in difficulties. But somehow a man like me, who has interests all over the world, must live in perpetual fear and trembling when he is out of the swing of good luck. If he open an evening paper, there may be a snake in the pages to sting him.” And Sir Stamford crumpled up viciously a copy of the ‘St James’s Gazette’ which lay on the table beside his coffee-cup.

“No bad news in the ‘St James’s,’ is there ?” asked Jack, indifferently.

“Not precisely bad news ; but still there is

a worrying telegram. You know I am chairman of the Sumatra Colonisation Company?"

"Everybody who is anybody knows that."

"Well, the Sumatra has a magnificent field before it. With fair fortune and able management, it might follow in the footsteps of the old East India Company."

"I have always thought you never showed your penetration more conspicuously than when you accepted the direction of that magnificent enterprise. You may annex an archipelago of spice-bearing islands to the Imperial Crown of England. You may crush the Dutch—a slow-going race of dam-diggers—out of competition with us. You may not only enrich yourself, your friends, and your shareholders beyond the dreams of avarice, but you may be handed down to history through all generations as the Hastings of some future Macaulay."

Jack pulled himself up in the flood-tide of his eloquence, because he feared he might be fooling Sir Stamford beyond the top of his bent. He need have entertained no apprehensions of the kind. Sir Stamford knew little of Lord Macaulay, and less of Warren

Hastings ; but he believed that Jack meant to be complimentary, and no amount of incense could sicken him.

“ Yes, yes ; I know, I know. And you may be sure I had thought of all that. And, on my soul and conscience, the dividends may be stupendous ; for the scheme is a sound one as ever was devised. The last reports were as promising as could be imagined ; and I was actually counting my chickens as I walked up to this club.”

“ And what may have happened to interfere with the hatching ? ”

“ Nothing very serious, to be sure ; but all is thrown back into uncertainty. In a colonisation scheme like ours, everything depends on the man to whom we must confide its local working. There is no telegraph beyond Penang ; so our Resident, factotum, or plenipotentiary is practically master of the situation. I had found an excellent man—Chamberlain, an old Indian political agent and a dashing cavalry officer. He knew all about the administration of native territory ; he could have drilled semi-savage levies, and commanded them. He was honest as the day

besides, and yet biddable; and I thought I had seldom made a happier hit."

"And now?"

"And now, after really a comfortable little dinner, when I settle myself to sipping the last glass of the Chambertin, I call for the evening paper by way of digestive. I knew I should see a rise in Mexican Preferences, and so I did—when, turning over the page, there is a telegram from Penang. Chamberlain has slipped through our hands, and gone and died of jungle fever."

"Hard lines upon you, and not over-pleasant for Colonel Chamberlain!" Jack spoke carelessly, that he might collect his thoughts. The ball had been actually tossed into his hands; now his business was to play it back to the best advantage.

"It's bad for Chamberlain, no doubt—or for his widow," said Sir Stamford, peevishly; "but why did he assure us that his constitution was fever-proof? I remember his very words, and I must say he has behaved badly. Only see the position he has left us in. It's not easy putting one's hand on the right man at a day's notice. Should we find him, he

will have ever so many preparations to make before he sails. And every day is of vital consequence, for we have not a head that is worth counting in the Settlement."

Sir Stamford looked to Jack for some answer; but Jack sat silent, and in deep abstraction. His cigarette had burned almost down to his lips; but even that failed to rouse him from his profound reflection. Sir Stamford watched him curiously; then grew impatient; and finally ejaculated an impetuous "Well?"

Then Jack started out of his dream, with an admirably feigned blending of confusion and apology.

"Forgive me, Sir Stamford; but to tell the truth, I was thinking over a wild idea that flashed across me. There are strange coincidences in this sublunary world, and our meeting to-night may have been anything rather than fortuitous. Who knows? The fate of ever so many people may depend on it."

Sir Stamford cared little for the mob of people, but he was deeply concerned in the fate of one promoter. He was really interested: he hung upon Jack's lips, which were not particularly quick to open. When Jack

did open them, if his speech was not of gold, it fell like a tolerable imitation of that precious metal.

"As it happens, I believe I know the very man you want. The worst is, that there is literally no hope of engaging him."

"Who in the world do you mean?—not Hobbler? I had thought of him; but he is booked already for the Government of Northern Australia."

"Hobbler! pooh! pooh! Forgive me, Sir Stamford, but I am surprised. Hobbler, as no one knows better than you, is a simple martinet among upper clerks—a mere man of routine—only fitted to go in leading-strings, and then likely enough to come to grief. No, I was thinking of a very different individual; but then, like Hobbler, he is booked already."

"Let me hear his name at any rate?"

"I mean David Moray of Glenconan, a great landed proprietor in the north of Scotland, who made a large fortune, besides, in mercantile pursuits in China."

"I know him," answered Sir Stamford, and his face fell. "I have met him at Winstanley's,

and I did not think much of him. To be sure, he did understand something about the East, for I remember his waking up on a discussion about Chinese tariffs. But he had little to say about anything else, and I heard he had come to utter grief in that Scottish bank business. He is a connection of yours, by the way," added Sir Stamford, suspiciously.

"He *is* a connection of mine—a near connection, and a great friend; and that perhaps is your only chance of securing his invaluable services. Don't imagine for a moment that I am pressing them on you. Should anything of the kind come round to Moray, he would send both you and me to the mischief. He is the most independent-minded man I ever met, and the shrewdest; with extraordinary fertility of resource, and exceptional decision of character."

"Yet he has been fool enough to lose his fortune in that ridiculous bank."

"To compromise it, and without the slightest indiscretion on his own part." Jack explained all the circumstances. "And now he has laid new plans, and set his face as a flint to carry them out: if we can induce him to alter

them in any way, it can only be by working on him through his daughter."

And Jack explained again, with certain amplifications and reservations. "I bet ten to one you don't enlist him," he went on; "so I may tell you what I know him to be, without the slightest false delicacy. In the first place, he is a man of the nicest honour, whose word would be better than his bond to his employers. At this moment he has resigned the fruits of a life's labour rather than owe a shilling beyond what he can pay. Quixotic, between you and me. But what will you have? No man is absolutely perfect, and perfect honesty should be a useful quality in your factotum. But honourable as he is, he is a shrewd man of the world, and has been gathering experience all his days in an unruffled course of successful adventures. He used to be hand in glove with every prince and potentate between the Chinese ports and the Straits Settlements. His fame would go before him to Sumatra, if it has not been published there long ago. He is the very man to turn your resources to account,—copper, gold, and diamonds—coal, cotton, nutmegs, cinna-

mon, and all the rest of it. He could make the coolies and the working folks love him like their father ; he would put down disturbances with the strong hand ; he would deal summarily with the Dutch pretensions they have no power to enforce. But what am I dreaming of, and why should I tantalise you ? Moray has booked a passage for Singapore in the Fire King, and he is not a man to go back from his plans. A pity, isn't it ? But it cannot be helped. But God bless me, Sir Stamford, I must bid you good night ! Your agreeable conversation has carried me on to 11.30, and I have an appointment in Lombard Street to-morrow before I turn up in Whitehall."

"A moment, Venables — just a moment. Really I have had no time to think. And you say there is no hope of treating with Mr Moray ?"

"None whatever, so do not bother about it. I am really sorry I said anything on the subject. Unless, indeed," said Jack, coming back to his companion, whose slow meditations were outstripped by his volubility—"unless, indeed, as I said before, anything were to be done through his daughter ; and that seems like

seething the kid in its mother's milk—seducing Moray through the domestic affections. Well, good night."

"What a hurry you are in! Sit down for a moment. You are talking nonsense when you speak of seducing him through the affections. If we chose to engage him, we should make it worth his while—worth any man's while,—that I can tell you."

"Make it worth his while!" repeated Jack slowly, subsiding into his seat again. "Make it worth his while! Well, as we are upon the subject, you may give me a notion, once for all, of the terms the Company would be willing to offer. They would not sway Moray from a settled resolution by a hair's-breadth; but they might possibly be used as arguments by his daughter—and, believe me, that Miss Moray will be our best advocate." Unobserved by Sir Stamford, it will be seen that Jack had assumed a tacit solidarity of common interest.

On that hint and in his excitement Sir Stamford spoke, naming terms which would have made Jack open his eyes had he not by an effort half closed them languidly.

"That might do," he observed, sleepily.

"Do! I should think so, indeed," growled Sir Stamford.

"Yes; that might possibly do. But there would be another point, and of more importance than mere pecuniary considerations."

"And what may that be?"

"Moray would insist upon having his hands unfettered, to act as agent and Resident under unlimited responsibility, for which he must, of course, be ready to answer. I need hardly say, that at that distance from headquarters, the stipulation will be entirely in your own interest. But as you and I know Moray better than the Board of Directors—as, in fact, he would be nominated through your influence, as your own man—it must be understood that he may count upon you for arranging that."

"Can you put off your engagement in the City to-morrow morning?" demanded Sir Stamford, abruptly.

"It would be awkward and most inconvenient; but I daresay I could manage it—that is to say, if I thought it would help you over your difficulty."

"Come to my house, then, at ten o'clock, and I will give you a more decided answer, so

far as a single member of the Board may speak. It would be altogether opposed to my way of doing business to settle matters of such importance in a club smoking-room, close upon the stroke of twelve."

"Hooked, by Jove!" ejaculated Jack, in an outburst of self-complacency and gratitude, as, taking leave of the City magnate on the club steps, he saw him safely ensconced in his brougham. "I don't think he is likely to break away—but there is no knowing; and I wish the morning's interview were well over. What fools some sharp fellows are, to be sure! though he may thank his stars if he gets Glen-conan for his Resident."

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE COMPANY'S NEW RESIDENT.

LITTLE did Moray think, as he went down the steps at the Fenchurch Street Station one dreary day in November to take a train to the docks to revisit the Fire King, with feelings strongly in sympathy with that most dismal of metropolitan stations—little did he think that at the very moment he was the subject of an animated discussion at the Board of the Sumatra Colonisation Company. So it was, however: Sir Stamford had “taken him up”; and Sir Stamford invariably managed to have his way with his fellow-directors. After what we have seen of him, it need not be said that he was far from an able man; but he made none the worse chairman on that account, as chairmen go. He had the knack of using other men's brains; and now he was driving

home all the arguments with which Jack had primed him two evenings before and in their subsequent interviews. Indeed he would have produced Mr Venables in court, had he not feared to betray himself as the mouthpiece of a mere boy. Jack would have been immensely flattered to hear how the chairman echoed and re-echoed him. Of course Sir Stamford had been brought to believe in his new *protégé*, and was persuaded that in sending Moray on this mission he was doing his best for Sir Stamford Scraper and his shareholders.

“A man of iron, gentlemen—a constitution case-hardened by long exposure in the East—an unrivalled knowledge of the oriental trade—a personal acquaintance with half the potentates there. A born leader of other men—always predisposed to peace from his mercantile training, but ready to fight should fighting be indispensable—easy-natured, but with extraordinary determination of will—great readiness of resource—the hand of iron under the glove of silk—the sort of autocrat who will keep things straight with the European settlers, and will be worshipped by the natives. Then he is a gentleman of family and power-

ful political connections—a circumstance which, I need not remind you, may save us, should there be difficulties raised at home as to our working the charter."

" You know him well, then ?" asked one old gentleman, innocently. He was an ex-colonial governor, verging on dotage.

Sir Stamford coughed, but was equal to the occasion.

" Mr Moray has lived much abroad, Sir George. I cannot boast of so close a personal acquaintance as I should desire. But I appreciate his high character thoroughly, and am glad to say we have not a few intimate friends in common."

In short, as the upshot of the proceedings, the Board passed a unanimous resolution that it would be eminently desirable in the interests of the Company to engage the services of David Moray, Esquire of Glenconan, as their acting manager and Resident in the East. The Board further granted its chairman discretionary powers to conduct the negotiations—appointing a special meeting for an early day to receive and confirm his report.

The first impulse of Jack Venables, when

he had carried off a triumph so brilliant and unexpected, was to rush away to his cousin with the joyful news. On second thoughts, he resolved to restrain himself, and by a sublime effort of self-sacrifice decided to say nothing to her in the meantime. Sir Stamford's advances to her father would be more of an agreeable surprise; and it would be the better, for the scheme that lay so near to her heart, that she should be ignorant of the Company's proposals. She would know well enough and soon enough who had aided her so effectually; and alas! and after all, what did it matter?

Moray had come back from the Victoria Docks almost at the same hour as before; and the lunch had, if possible, been rather more melancholy than on the former occasion. The day of departure was drawing nigh; his determination was firm as ever; and Grace, to her sad disappointment, had heard not a word from Jack. "He may have been able to do nothing for us," she thought. "I hardly hoped that he could. But at all events, he might have sent a message to say he had not forgotten us,"—when a lumbering barouche

drove up to the door, and a bulky footman descending from the box, performed a tremendous cacophony on the knocker, which was out of all proportion to the size of the house.

"Sir Stamford Scraper!" ejaculated Moray, glancing at the card. "I know the man by name; he is on the direction of no end of companies. Made a fortune, they say, and perhaps lost it again, by electric lighting. What can he possibly want with me? Ask the gentleman to walk up-stairs."

Grace muttered something unintelligible, and clasped her hands nervously under the table. "A message from Jack," she thought to herself; and she was sensible of something like a cold perspiration. Whether she had suffered or been happy, she would have found it hard to tell, during the mortal hour and a quarter during which her father remained closeted with his visitor.

Yet the main points of the business between the gentlemen had been settled promptly enough. With all his "bumptiousness," which may be used for want of a better word, Sir Stamford was enough of a man of the world

to be able to unite suavity to dignity when it suited him. He thought too well of himself to be a vulgar toady ; but he could be winningly courteous to his superiors, or to men whom he hoped to use. And Jack had sounded Glenconan's trumpet to such purpose, that Sir Stamford came prepared to soothe the chieftain's Highland pride. Nothing could be in better taste than his self-introduction : there was a happy mixture of respect with courtly friendliness.

“The object of my visit must be my apology for presenting myself unceremoniously ; though I need hardly say how gratified I feel at any opportunity which enables me to improve my acquaintance with Mr Moray. We have met at dinner more than once, as perhaps you may remember.”

Moray, as it happened, did not remember ; but he bowed, and begged his visitor to be seated. Thereupon Sir Stamford, full of his purpose, went straight to his point without circumlocution.

It would be little to say that Moray was taken aback ; he was astounded. By this time he thought he had pretty nearly “dree'd his

penance," as the Scotch say, for any indiscretions of his early youth. And in the thick darkness that had been gathering about him—in the dismal sense of approaching separation from all in the world he loved most dearly,—he had begun to doubt of a beneficent Providence. He had striven his best to acquiesce in its decrees : he had reminded himself that he was being purged of the faults he had lamented. All the same, he had been murmuring ; and for the life of him, he could not help it. The friends in whom he had trusted had failed him—they had given him little but fair words ; and he had taken his passage for the East in desperation and as a *pis aller*, with the prospect of groping in the decline of his life after the fortune he had followed in his youth so cheerily.

Now all seemed likely to change as by an enchanter's spell, and the recollection of his doubts and fears humiliated him. Faithless and unbelieving, the way had nevertheless been opened up ; and the worldly-minded and prosaic Sir Stamford was the messenger selected by Providence. Such a post as the smooth-spoken Baronet came to offer him was

the very position he would have desired. It offered his ambition noble opportunities : it left his arms free ; he might do much to retrieve his fortunes and secure a competency for his beloved daughter ; he might do more in a few years as a benevolent despot in the Malay Archipelago, than he could accomplish as a private individual through a lifetime in East London. For the bank, devouring monster as it might be, could hardly swallow more than he at present possessed. Had Sir Stamford known all, he might have spared much of his breath ; he had caught his fish ere the net had well been cast.

But knowing nothing of what was passing in Moray's mind—and as the canny Scot, though perfectly civil, retained his mask and kept his own sage counsel—Sir Stamford was lavish of satisfactory pledges.

"I need not say," he went on, confidentially, "that I am aware we must pay for such a man as you. It would be the worst economy driving too close a bargain with any gentleman we send out on so important a mission. You must know something of the resources we hope to develop ; and if we are to achieve

a great success, they ought to be developed speedily. In our territory of Sarambang, which stretches along the sea-coast for fifty miles or more, and covers heaven only knows how many square leagues, the natural riches, I believe, are practically inestimable. We can grow anything from cotton and sugar to cloves, cinnamon, and nutmegs. The streams that may be applied to purposes of irrigation run sometimes over sands of gold, or more often through the deep alluvial deposits containing the germs of still greater natural riches." There Sir Stamford, in opening the flood-gates of his eloquence, was quoting from the Company's original prospectus—which, be it said by the way, was based on reports more reliable than is generally the case in similar productions.

As Moray listened with close attention, from time to time throwing in an observation or asking a question, the chairman came to believe in him more and more. He had evidently all the threads of oriental commerce at his finger-ends: he would know how to pull them in time and place. Thence Sir Stamford passed on to the political situation.

There were native chiefs to be conciliated or subsidised, as economically as possible. There were formidable neighbours, with hereditary piratical proclivities, who must either be kept at bay or crushed in case of need. There was the Dutch Government, which claimed a shadowy sovereignty over great part of the great island of Sumatra, even in districts whither it had never sent a soldier, and where it had never shown its tricolour. The Dutch had no well-founded pretension to any part of the lands embraced in the Company's concession. Nevertheless they might possibly give trouble, as there was little question they would desire to do.

On that dark and delicate political ground, Moray showed himself even more at home than in commercial matters.

“I ought to know the Malay nature,” he said; “I have lived and fought and traded among Malays for a good part of my life.”

Then he went on to talk of the intricacies of Straits politics, which would be useful precedents for conducting affairs in Sumatra. “For those Malay princes,” he went on, “are pretty much the same all over the world.

Fanatics in religion when it suits their purpose, though their creed sits lightly enough on their consciences ; pirates ever willing to make prey of the weak, always ready to knock under to resolution and rifled guns ; and ruling their subjects with such a rod of iron, that their subjects are always eager to slip their necks out of the collar. Nowhere is honesty a better policy with all classes, so long as honesty is backed up by pluck, and power, and unflinching will."

As he uttered that uncompromising maxim, his rugged features and honest grey eyes lighted up with so stern a gleam of determination, that Sir Stamford for the moment was afraid of him. Consequently he respected him more and more ; though he felt like the lion - tamer who had got hold of a noble animal, that on the faintest provocation might turn again and rend him.

He by no means liked being overawed, and was not sorry to change the subject, now he was persuaded that the future of the Company was safe in the firm hands to which he was to confide it.

" Well, my dear sir, there will doubtless be

details to be discussed with the directors. They will like to have their say on the subject, though we may consider everything practically settled. In fact, they have given me *carte blanche* to treat, by a unanimous resolution of the Board. And I can hardly perhaps pay a higher tribute to your business qualities when I remind you, that though you have gained my entire confidence, not a word has passed between us as to pay and appointments."

Moray laughed.

"It is an oversight I should never have deemed I could be guilty of. It is not my habit—be assured of that. But *que voulez-vous?* For a year or two now, I have been out of the way of trading;" and he added, with a somewhat melancholy smile, "I was learning to comport myself as a gentleman of fortune. Moreover, I was persuaded by your talk from the first, that such a Company under a chairman of such intelligent views could not fail to be sufficiently liberal. And I am bound to add," he went on, in a burst of his natural frankness, "that the situation you offered suited my ideas so well, that the pay,

important as it is, became somewhat of a secondary consideration."

Nothing could have better shown the progress that Moray had made in the dogmatic opinion of the self-important chairman, than the fact that this rash avowal did not affect him unfavourably. The day before, it would have been a good reason for lowering the terms ; now, if anything, it tended to raise them. He had hit upon the shrewdest of men of the world, who would, notwithstanding, set the interests of the Company before his own. After all, a trifle of pay more or less meant nothing to the personal dividends of the chairman ; while a man who could make the Company flourish was veritably a pearl of inestimable price.

"Well, the matter has been left in some measure in my hands, and perhaps you may have seen by this time that I am not one to haggle with such a man as you. What say you to a fixed allowance of £2500 per annum ? There is a Government House, and a monthly allowance which you may fix yourself to cover the table—for you will be expected to entertain your subordinates, and

give your secretary, &c., the run of your larder. Besides that, you have two per cent on the net profits of all exports from the Settlement. At the lowest figures of late years, it should come to nearly as much as your fixed salary; with management like yours it may be ever so much more. So give me your hand on it, and let us clench our bargain."

Moray gave his hand, and gripped that of the other man with a fervour that touched him in more ways than one. He felt inclined to blow his smarting fingers; and at the same time, he liked the warmth of the grasp. It seemed to him as if this lion of the jungles was licking the liberal hand that fed him. A thought occurred to him on the spur of the moment.

"And now, my dear Mr Moray, that we are friends for life, I hope, as well as political and commercial partners, may I beg a favour of you in the name of the Board? It strikes me that, in the interests of the shareholders and their shares, an appointment like this should be solemnised with some ceremony. Will you give us the pleasure of your com-

pany at a little banquet before you sail? Place, the Albion in Aldersgate Street; time, to be arranged in consultation with my colleagues."

Moray made a wry face; but it was no time to stand upon trifles. "Of course I shall come, and with great pleasure, Sir Stamford, since you ask me. But I must warn you that, like Moses, I am no orator; and that if you parade your lawgiver and leader in public, you will probably show him to disadvantage."

"Oh, I will be your Aaron, and say anything you may leave unsaid," returned Sir Stamford, with infinite readiness. "I don't want to flatter you; but simply showing the leading shareholders the new Resident will send up the shares in anticipation of the future."

"Be it as you will," said Moray, smiling. "If you think showing your Sumatra shareholders a Highland deer-stalker will have such an effect, it would be childish indeed to refuse to parade myself. But by the way, Sir Stamford, and at the risk of falling further in your good opinion, there is another ques-

tion I had forgotten. I have been so absorbed in the object of your visit, that I have never asked to what or to whom I am indebted for it."

"Oh, ah, very true," said Sir Stamford, stammering. To tell the truth, in his satisfaction at having made prize of Moray, he had forgotten Mr Venables, and was very willing to forget him. "Ah, very true : well, the fact is, that I had long known Mr Moray most favourably by reputation. Mr Winstanley, and other men connected with the East, have often spoken of you. But I confess it was a chance, more than anything else, that put our present fortunate arrangement into my head. I chanced to meet a young friend of mine and a connection of yours at a club the other night—young Venables. We got talking about Sumatra and oriental trade, and somehow your name came up. The hint was enough for me, and on the hint I acted."

Moray saw it all, and his first impression was one of mortification. The world had indeed been turned topsy-turvy with him, since the day, not so very long ago, when he had

been patronising an impetuous boy in the plenitude of his wealth and wisdom. Now the boy had "been" and helped him to such a position as he had hardly dared to covet. There was a passing impulse to throw up the whole affair; but then he thought of Grace, and almost simultaneously of good Jack Venables. To dream of refusing his help in the circumstances — to reject his warm-hearted services on the score of his youth—could only be a temptation of the devil. What a pity it was that Grace could not love the boy, and lighten an almost intolerable load of obligation! Well, there was time to think about all that; and it reminded him that Grace must be on the tenter-hooks of expectation. Though they were living in very modest lodgings, it was only due to Sir Stamford, humbug as his last confession might make him appear, to introduce him formally to his daughter.

And Grace's gratitude and cordiality—for she had not, like her father, got a glimpse behind the scenes—confirmed the Baronet in his friendly feelings. He thought the better of himself, if possible, for being in a position to patronise these interesting *protégés*.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## THE CUP AND THE LIP.

“OH, Jack,” was all Grace’s greeting to her cousin when he made his appearance at the lodgings in Ebury Street, late in the afternoon, on the day of Sir Stamford’s call. At first her heart was too full for words ; but her looks were more eloquent than any speech could have been. She found her voice subsequently, and had enough to say ; but that look and simple ejaculation were more than sufficient for Mr Venables. For once he stammered, and was almost as tongue-tied as she ; for once he honestly tried to make little of his services, instead of magnifying them. It was waste of breath, and perhaps he was not sorry. Grace would not have it : she would not hear of the arrangement being due to a happy accident ; nor did he care to boast of the subtle

diplomacy by which he had brought Sir Stamford to the point, by judiciously befooling him. Remembering what she had refused him, and how he had repaid her, she glorified his generosity more and more, as her emotions fairly got the mastery. She hardly knew what she said, yet her eyes said more than her lips. How far Leslie would have liked it, I cannot say. He would have been less than man had he not been jealous ; and never had his lady-love looked more beautiful. For once he was altogether out of her mind ; yet all the time her heart was true to him. Had Jack been given over to his old self-seeking—had he been so far left to himself, encouraged by her praises and her smiles, as to say a word of the old love, or to hint at the old suit,—he would have lost in one second all he had gained. It was his grand disinterestedness she exalted and adored ; and though she spoke of love, she only liked him.

Nor did Jack, who had been studying his cousin pretty closely of late, fail to comprehend her. All the same, he enjoyed those first-fruits of his kind action. He had made up his mind heroically to spare nothing in her

service : it was no fault of his if success had come so easily, and it was only right that she should take the will for the deed. So, like a cat basking in the sun, and being delightfully stroked and tickled, he rolled himself over metaphorically, and abandoned himself to the caresses.

And as the French proverb says the appetite comes in eating, Jack enjoyed the luxury of doing good actions so much that he determined —again I follow the French—not to pull up in a path so seductive. Already an idea had flashed to his receptive brain, that he might handsomely complete his work by coming to an understanding with Ralph Leslie. As to that he said nothing to Grace. He had learned already that in that Machiavellian benevolence of his, silence and surprises were half the battle.

Leslie had already heard the good news from Moray. He would have been more than mortal had he not received them with mingled feelings. He heartily congratulated his uncle and his friend ; but he had a sickening sinking at the heart when he thought of himself and his fortune. Moray seemed made independent of his sympathy and self-sacrifice — though of

that, as he flattered himself, he felt unfeignedly glad. But on the other hand, although Moray had said nothing on the subject, he had a sad foreboding that Grace was to go from him ; and God only knew what might happen in her absence. He must leave everything to God ; but meantime he must be content to suffer. Then how he did envy Jack Venables ! He almost feared that he hated him. There are some men born to luck in this world ; while others are the hapless victims of their destiny. He would have sacrificed everything he possessed to help his uncle and Grace. In fact, he had given up all he possessed, and was wearing himself out in a garret—it really was a tolerably comfortable set of rooms—that he might get a living by literature and poetry, when the fortunate Mr Jack Venables swaggers in, and by the simple breath of his mouth changes everything as by enchantment. Truly the luck of some men was wonderful, and altogether out of proportion to their merits.

Thus ruminating, he heard a familiar knock ; and his impulse was to ring and bid the servant deny him. Second and better thoughts prevailed. “ Let Jack come up and parade

his good deeds ; it is only the foretaste of my future sufferings.”

Jack did come up ; but he came in like a breath of June, rather than the rough March whirlwind Leslie had apprehended. His manner was almost deprecating ; he was evidently ill at ease.

“ You have heard the news about Glenconan ? ” he asked.

“ I have ; our uncle has just been with me. He well knew how deeply I was interested ; and I need not say how glad I am.”

But as he spoke, he felt he lied ; and he knew well that his looks belied him. Jack smiled, and began to be more at his ease.

“ You are glad of course, because you always think of others before yourself ; but between ourselves, and in the frankness of friendship, it brings rather a heavy blow on you.”

“ It is a sad separation, and I am sorry to see them go ; but in the circumstances, I can conceive of nothing better for him.”

“ No doubt. And this engagement of his will be a blessing to Grace ; for she will insist on his taking her with him, and I am persuaded he will not refuse.”

"So I supposed," exclaimed Leslie, almost savagely. He winced under Jack's remark, which he found equally true and ill-timed.

It was the show of irritation for which Jack had manœuvred. He threw himself back in his chair, and looked full in his friend's face.

"My dear old fellow, let us have done once for all with this nonsense, which is unworthy of the like of us. Let us play our cards down on the table. I loved Grace dearly ; I found she loved you passionately, and only liked me ; I have given her up. I know in my conscience she has chosen wisely ; I have never forgotten that day above Lochrosque. You will have her for your wife and your life-companion, and an angel does not fall to the lot of every man. You surely do not grudge me the poor satisfaction of sparing her the separation from her father, and smoothing the way to her marriage."

"I never asked her for my wife," murmured Leslie.

"You have only to ask and to have : 'tis I who tell you so ; though it may be a work of supererogation confirming you in your convictions. Yes, you and Grace will be

happy; and so shall I, in my own way and somewhat later."

Leslie, though wretched enough in the meantime, on his own account, felt a great pity for Jack at losing Grace, and, like Grace, was so deeply touched, that he felt it difficult to express himself. In his forgetfulness that circumstances had been fast moulding and purifying the other man, he reproached himself for having so much undervalued him.

" You make far too much of that little affair on Lochrosque. I only did what any one else might have done; and now, at all events, you have wiped off the score, and left a heavy balance on the other side."

" Let that flea stick to the wall, as Donald Ross would say. I know all about that day, and so does Donald. But I had wellnigh forgotten what I have come specially to speak about. There is no time to be lost, as to making your arrangements for going out with the Morays."

" For going out with the Morays!" echoed Ralph. " What in the world do you mean, Jack?"

" What I say," answered Jack, sharply.

"You have been our uncle's right-hand man all through this bank business. You are engaged, or as good as engaged, to his daughter. You have nothing I know of to keep you now in this country—all the liquidation business can be done by deputy or correspondence ; so, if I were in your shoes, I should volunteer for Sumatra."

"And in what capacity, may I ask ?" responded Leslie, half inquiringly, half incredulously.

"Why, as the new Resident's secretary. The place, so far as I know, has not been yet filled up. It is quite indispensable that the Resident should have a secretary ; and the Board, you may be certain, will not interfere with his choice."

Leslie sat silent and reflecting. The visions of bliss opened before him dazzled him : a long sea-voyage in the society of Grace ; a family life under the roof with Grace and her father ; the assurance that, should it please him to ask her hand, neither she nor yet her father would refuse it. And all this was planned for him by his generous rival, who could do more in his favour than any one else. He sat silent

and reflecting still; but lest Jack should possibly deem him ungrateful, he reached out a hand.

Whereupon Jack warmed up, becoming at once practical and playful.

"Nothing in this world could have turned out more happily for you, my dear boy. The moment you get the appointment,—and that, as I need hardly repeat to you, is safe—for think what a blessing your collaboration will be to Glenconan,—the moment you get the appointment, your marriage is as good as arranged. It is all a question of delicacy and the opportune moment. Then your health comes in. You know what Cutler told you—that you were as strong as I, or Glenconan, or Donald Ross, but that change of scene and distraction from care were imperative. Well, by what we propose, your anxieties disappear; and as for change of scene, you will have enough of that in all conscience. I don't know how that poem of yours may have progressed. I am quite sure that if you stay on in town, it might be your elegy and inscribed on your tombstone; but only think of the inspirations you may draw from moon-

light and cool shadows under the noonday blaze in the spice-groves of the South and the tropical forests ! ”

Leslie smiled, and naturally yielded to the seductions.

“ But you are aware how Moray’s difficulties arose ; and you know, too, that duty bids me see him through them.”

“ Perhaps ; though that is a question for casuists. But how, may I ask, can you help him better, while his liquidation hangs on hand and drags on, than by accepting a certain income with free quarters, and leaving your leisure moments at liberty for literary pursuits ? You have been living, as I know, parsimoniously on your rental. Now you may leave it to accumulate against contingencies. Besides, if you owe something to your notions of honour, you owe much more to Grace. How would she feel when her father’s affairs are straightened out, as I have no doubt they will be, if you had made an unhappy despatch of yourself in the meantime by working or worrying yourself to death ? ”

It need hardly be said that Leslie yielded to reasoning which was so strongly backed up

by his inclinations. It need hardly be said that Moray was only too happy to take a fast friend with him to the antipodes as secretary, sympathiser, and confidential adviser. There had been no further question as to his child accompanying him now. He had merely made some faint resistance for form's sake. And as he felt that her marriage with Ralph Leslie was preordained, it would be well for her happiness that her lover should accompany them. Besides, if he could assist Leslie to a new career, he owed it to him, since Leslie's rental had been given up to a reserve fund for the liquidators to draw upon.

So the articles of agreement were signed and sealed. The Board of the Sumatra Company gave a superb banquet to the new Resident, at which Moray spoke with knowledge and sound sense, which recommended him alike to directors and shareholders; at which Sir Stamford spoke diffusely, more to his own enjoyment than that of his audience; and at which Mr Leslie, as the Resident's secretary, was likewise landed upon his legs.

The departure was, on the whole, less sad than might have been expected. Moray's

spirits had risen with the relief from the depression of inactivity ; his heart beat high with his hopes of an active and useful career, in which he might win fame with a second fortune. Then he had regained the daughter he half feared he had lost. As for Grace, she had won her point, and was going in the company of her father and her lover to visit the fairyland of the southern tropics. While Leslie, already a different man, with health in his face, and elasticity in his muscles, had been lifted up to the seventh heaven of happiness. He was ashamed that he did not feel more deeply at parting with his mother—the more so that the lady had been detained in the North by a sharp attack of influenza ; but though he loved her dearly, he could not help himself, and then he hoped to see her again very speedily.

And, with a single exception, the little group of friends who had come on board to bid good-bye to the travellers, had no special reason for being in low spirits. There were Sir Stamford and a brother director, *ex officio*, who, of course, had no cause to feel anything but pleased, and whose presence was a check

on any possible effusiveness. There was Winstanley, saying everything that was polite and kind, repeating his assurances as to taking every care of everything and everybody at Glenconan, but as cheerful as the chairman of the Sumatra Company. There was Julia, occasionally whispering into Grace's ear, and weeping on her neck, when at last she took leave of her; but perhaps not altogether sorry, for private reasons of her own, that her fascinating friend was booked for the antipodes. And there was Jack Venables, rather more voluble and decidedly more noisy than was natural even to him; though a close observer—Miss Winstanley, for example—might have remarked that his volubility came by fits and starts.. And he was silent and distracted for a time, though with a saddening sense of happiness, when Leslie, leading him aside, fairly broke down in vain efforts to express his devoted gratitude.

“That day on Lochrosque!—that day on Lochrosque!” he ejaculated, in answer to Jack’s reminder. “It is unworthy of your good sense, Jack, to be perpetually harping upon that. I say, in the words of the warlike

Israelitish Judge, ‘ What have I done in comparison of you ? ’ and you know that I am speaking the truth. No fellow ever acted more nobly than you have done ; and it is the more to your credit, though very little to mine, that only a year ago I did not believe it was in you. For the future, behave as you will, I at least can never misunderstand you.’

“ Have it your own way, then, my good fellow—have it your own way,” answered Jack, lightly, returning the grasp of his friend with one hand, while he passed the other rapidly over his eyes. “ But heaven keep us in our senses ! what have we here ? ”

For Leslie had chosen that the interview should take place in the bustle, while the steamer was casting off her moorings in the docks, and most people were occupied about their own concerns. And the interview had been interrupted by a tall Scotch deer-hound, that had charged Mr Venables in a transport of excitement, and now, with a paw upon each shoulder, was rubbing a muzzle against his cheeks.

“ Bran here ! Bran on the Fire King ! Then

be sure that Donald Ross cannot be far off. And there the villain is—see, Ralph, behind the funnel, looking half proud and more than half ashamed of himself!"

Perceiving that he had been detected, Donald shuffled forward. His honest face flushed up with pleasure for a moment at the cordial greeting of his two young friends ; yet Donald was sad, and looked almost as careworn as Leslie had seemed but a fortnight before. As he told his master afterwards, who was more moved than he would have cared to own, at the unexpected meeting—

" You see, Glenconan, I could not put up with the thought that you would be going away again, though but for a bit, and me never to set eyes upon you. Then there was Miss Grace too—my blessing on the face of her. I would be minding it well, she might be sure, when she was far away, and yet I was fond to get another glimpse at it. So I sat down and wrote privately to the English young lady, and she was very kind and spoke to the gentleman, and he gave me permission to come away, and promised to say nothing of my coming. But it's a sore heart I have this

day, Glenconan, and this day the glen will be a valley of weeping."

Glenconan was much touched and somewhat remorseful. In the excitement of his new hopes he had half forgotten to be sorry, partly perhaps because his sanguine nature was already predicting a happy home-coming. But the simple grief of the poor dependants he was leaving was a reproach to him, though God knew he had felt for them deeply, so long as he had believed himself to be ruined. And besides, the apparition of the old keeper and the presence of Bran, who was now fawning and crouching at his feet in the little cabin, came to him in a fresh breath from his native hills, and brought a flood of bright and sad reminiscences. Donald, with his native shrewdness and delicacy, read what was passing in his master's mind, though he waited respectfully for the master to speak.

"I know, Donald—I know it well ; and my own heart would be wellnigh broken but that I believe that things are brightening for us. You must tell them all that I look forward to a happy return, and that we will have greater doings next time than the last."

He knew that his words were commonplace, but what better could he say? Though he felt to Donald as to an old friend, it was not in his nature to unbosom himself to an inferior: as it was, he had been more sentimental than was his habit. He was a man of generous deeds and deep feelings, rather than of smooth phrases. But Donald, who had been only waiting the opportunity, broke out in words of such absolute confidence in Glenconan's return, that in that hour of farewells they came as omens of encouragement destined to recur to his memory in his exile. And Donald ended realistically—

“And we will be gathering the oak out of the bogs and stacking the old fir-roots against the day when we will have the whole of the country in a blaze, from the rocks of Lochrosque to the cairn upon Funachan.”

When the friends of the travellers were getting ready to go ashore at Gravesend, Donald, in spite of the sorrows of the parting, was a proud and comparatively a happy man. Were not the words of his master ringing in his ears, “Your visit has done me a world of good”? and did not he carry away as a re-

membrance from his young mistress, with whom he had a long and confidential *tête-à-tête*, the very bit of blue ribbon she had been wearing round her beautiful neck? The only “scene” was made by Bran, and Bran, not unreasonably jealous of Finette—who had been adopted so unaccountably as one of the travelling party—crept under the sofa in his master’s cabin, and showed his teeth when they tried to prevail upon him to come forth. The dog knew well that Glenconan was going; and Donald, hurt at the preference, for once had spoken to him roughly.

The boat from Gravesend was rowed alongside, and a clerk, clambering up the side, held out a telegram. “Mr Ralph Leslie on board?” he asked, in a business-like manner—the impossible messenger of fate. Ralph seized the particoloured envelope with a sad foreboding, and tore it open with trembling fingers.

“Pray hold on with the boat for a moment. I shall go ashore with you.”

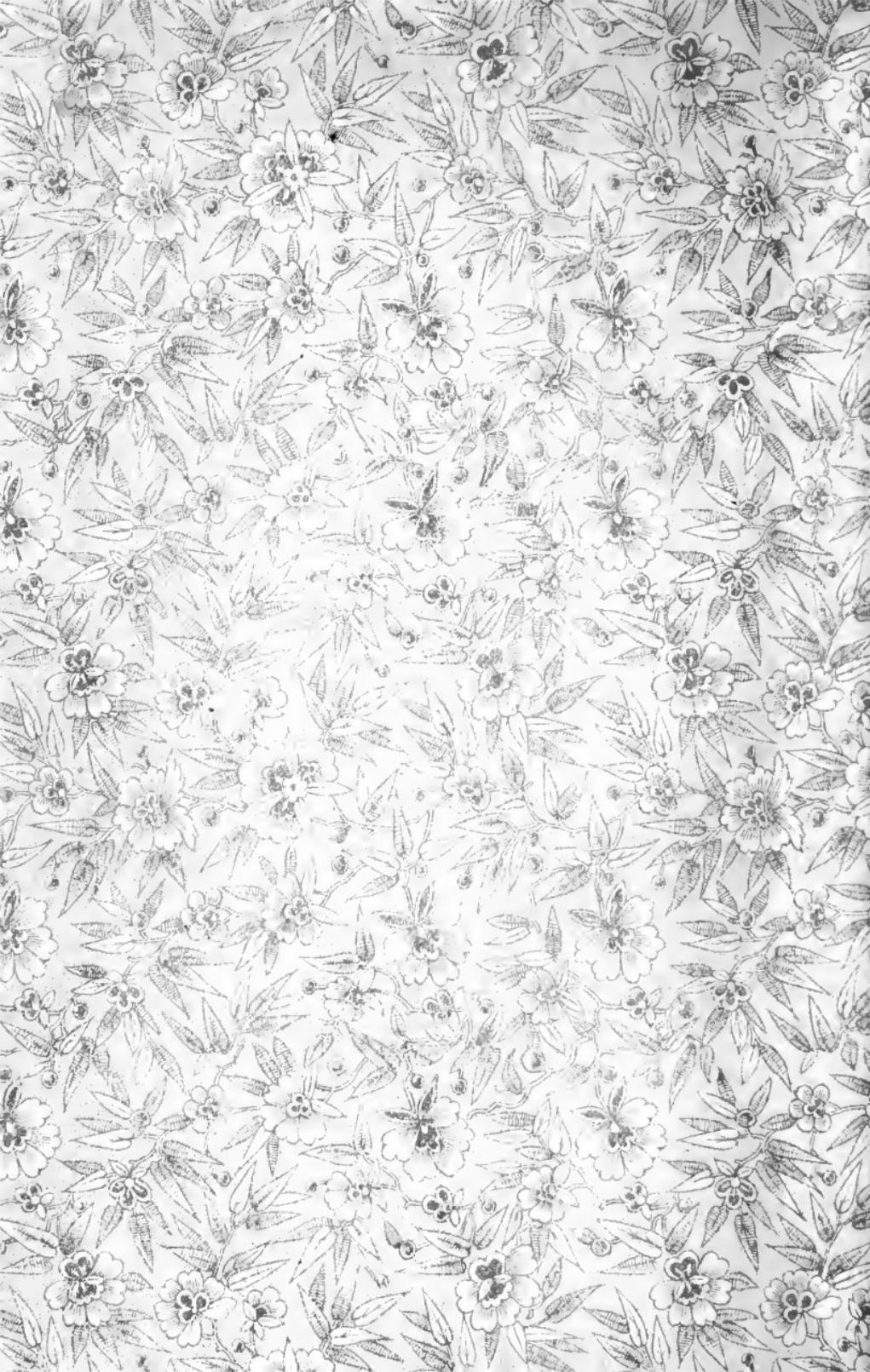
He pulled himself together with an effort. With that mob of people curiously looking on, it was neither the time nor the place for a display of feeling. There was no time for

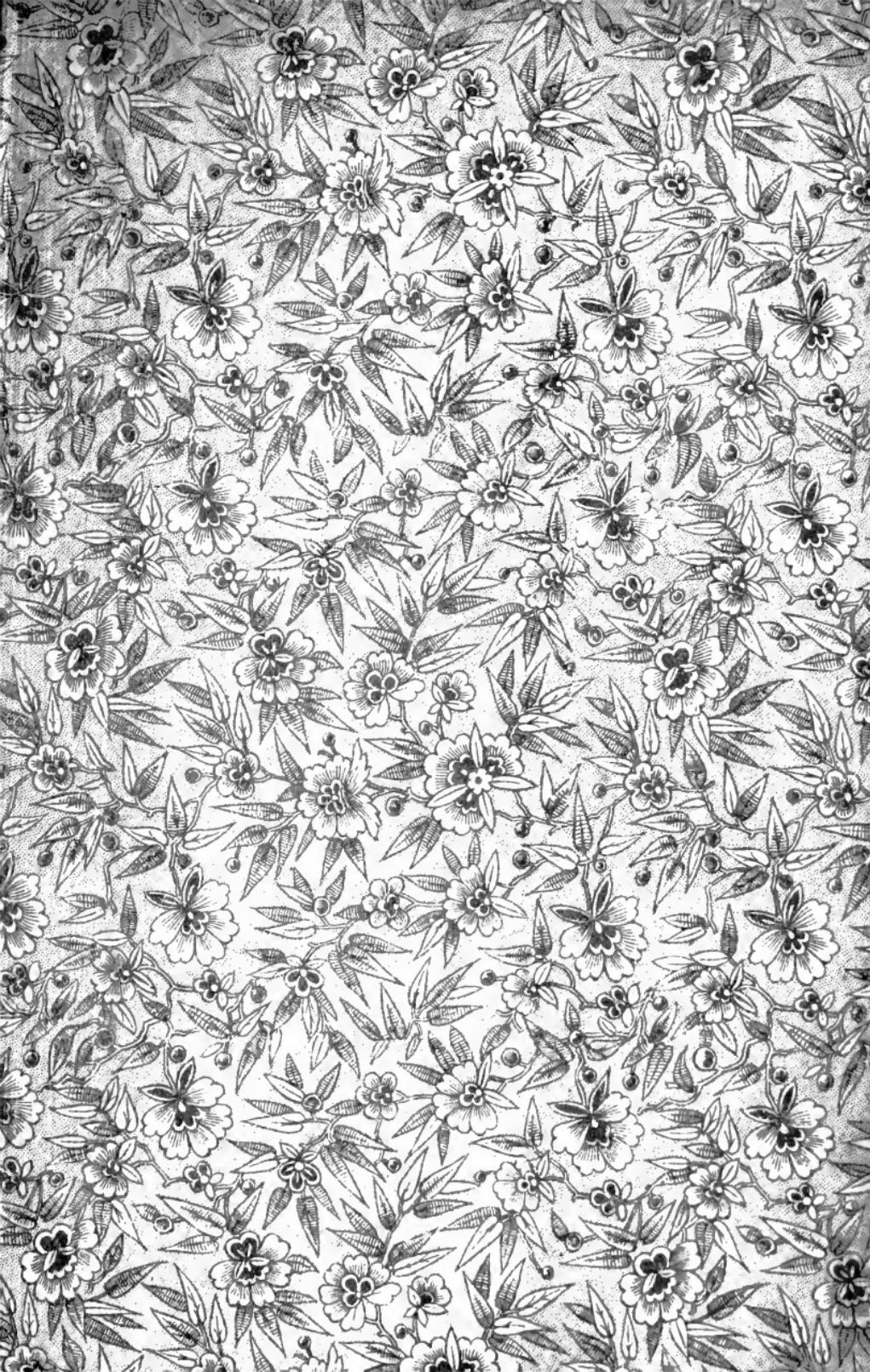
explanations. He passed the telegram to the astonished Moray, and Grace read it over her father's shoulder. He rushed down to his cabin, shouted for a steward, and returned on deck carrying his smaller luggage. A hurried leave-taking; a hasty half-embrace of Grace — some hundred pairs of eyes were centred on them; a final clutch of the hand from her father, with a "Not good-bye, my dear boy, but *au revoir*,"—and Ralph was almost tumbled down the ladder by the impatient officer on duty. As the boat shoved off and the steamer forged ahead, there was an exclamation from one of the men—"Look to the lady! she has fainted!"

END OF THE SECOND VOLUME.

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